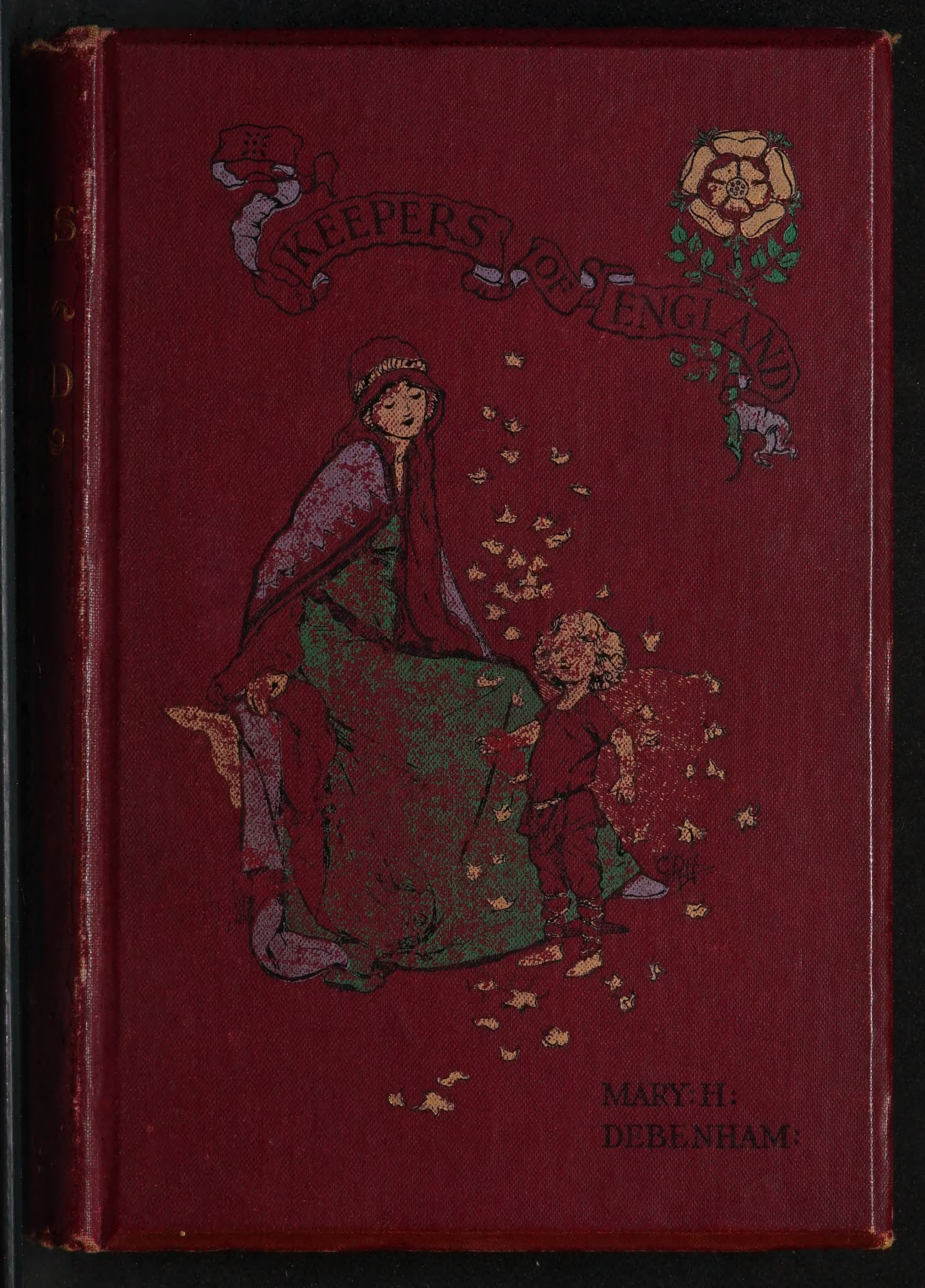

KEEPERS
OF
ENGLAND
MARY: H:
DEBENHAM:

KEEPERS OF ENGLAND

DEDICATED

TO

CHRISTINA

LONDON: PRINTED BY WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, LIMITED,
STAMFORD STREET AND CHARING CROSS.

Lily Wayman
With the Author's love
November 19

OSTRITHA'S INTERVIEW WITH THE KING. p. 264

KEEPERS OF ENGLAND

A Story of a Thousand Years ago

BY

MARY H. DEBENHAM

AUTHOR OF "ONE RED ROSE," "A LITTLE CANDLE," ETC.

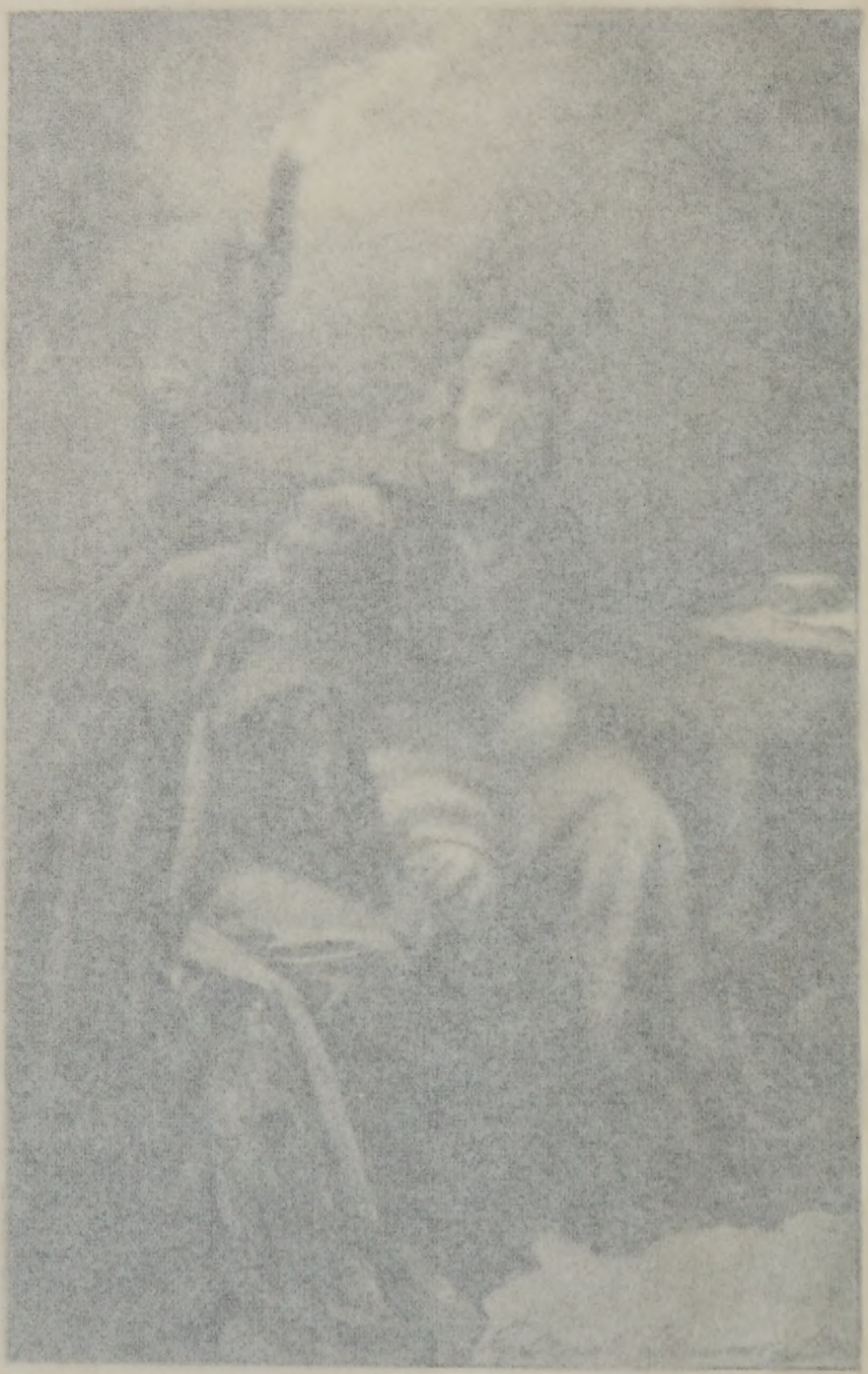
"Thank Him Who led us here, and roughly set
His Briton in blown seas and storming showers,
We have a voice, with which to pay the debt
Of boundless love and reverence and regret
To those great men who fought, and kept it ours."

TENNYSON.

WITH FOUR FULL-PAGE ILLUSTRATIONS BY
GERTRUDE D. HAMMOND

LONDON
NATIONAL SOCIETY'S DEPOSITORY
BROAD SANCTUARY, WESTMINSTER
NEW YORK: THOMAS WHITTAKER, 2 AND 3, BIBLE HOUSE

[All rights reserved]



OSTRITH'S INTERVIEW WITH THE KING. p. 84

KEEPERS OF ENGLAND

A Story of a Thousand Years ago

BY

MARY H. DEBENHAM

AUTHOR OF "ONE RED ROSE," "A LITTLE CANDLE," ETC.

"Thank Him Who isled us here, and roughly set
His Briton in blown seas and storming showers,
We have a voice, with which to pay the debt
Of boundless love and reverence and regret
To those great men who fought, and kept it ours."

TENNYSON.

WITH FIVE FULL-PAGE ILLUSTRATIONS BY
GERTRUDE D. HAMMOND

LONDON
NATIONAL SOCIETY'S DEPOSITORY
BROAD SANCTUARY, WESTMINSTER
NEW YORK: THOMAS WHITTAKER, 2 AND 3, BIBLE HOUSE

[*All rights reserved*]

By the Same Author

SOWING AND HARVESTING. Price 3*s.* 6*d.*

MY LADY'S SLIPPERS. Price 3*s.*

ONE RED ROSE. Price 3*s.* 6*d.*

THE LAIRD'S LEGACY. Price 2*s.* 6*d.*

TWO MAIDEN AUNTS. Price 2*s.*

THE MAVIS AND THE MERLIN. Price 2*s.*

MY GOD-DAUGHTER. Price 2*s.*

MOOR AND MOSS. Price 2*s.* 6*d.*

FOR KING AND HOME. Price 2*s.* 6*d.*

MISTRESS PHIL. Price 2*s.*

A LITTLE CANDLE. Price 3*s.* 6*d.*

FAIRMEADOW'S FARM. Price 2*s.*

ST. HELEN'S WELL. Price 2*s.*

National Society's Depository, Sanctuary,
Westminster. S.W.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	Two Mothers	9
II.	A Woman's Counsel	27
III.	"England's Darling"	44
IV.	Guests at Brockstede	58
V.	The Strange Singer	73
VI.	In the Woodman's Hut	91
VII.	The Danish Earl	107
VIII.	The Old Foe	125
IX.	For Eadgyth's Sake	144
X.	The King's Justice	163
XI.	On the Watch	181
XII.	The Assault of the Men of London ...	193
XIII.	The Hall of Hartington	210
XIV.	A Day of Discoveries	225
XV.	The Turning of the Lea	240
XVI.	King's Captain and King's Thegn	257
XVII.	Orphaned England	277

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	PAGE
OSTRITHA'S INTERVIEW WITH THE KING ...	(*Frontispiece*)
TWO MOTHERS	13
KING ALFRED'S VISIT TO BROCKSTEDE	56
THE WOUNDED STRANGER IN CUTHRED'S HUT	103
IN THE CHAPEL	209

KEEPERS OF ENGLAND

CHAPTER I

TWO MOTHERS

"There, where I sang thee, fair babe, to sleep,
Nought but the blood-stain our trace shall keep."

MRS. HEMANS.

IN spite of all the help that maps and histories can give us, an Englishman of to-day who could be carried by some magic power back to the year 878 would hardly recognize his native land. The Roman roads which we know to-day ran then as now, wide and straight from end to end of the country; but much of the land was overgrown with forests, which were, indeed, valuable to the inhabitants, both as hunting-ground and as providing food for the herds of swine, which wandered with their keeper in search of beech-nuts and acorns. Yet, but a few years before the time of which I write, the country had a prosperous appearance. The inhabitants were a sturdy, resourceful people, used to making the most of the land they

owned, and the green, undulating country of the south and east was dotted with timbered homesteads and wattled cottages, with here and there the larger houses of the gentry, distinguished by gate-house and belfry. But evil days were upon the land. It was just ninety years before that three ships, long, shallow boats, built for speed, and manned by fierce warriors, who were soldiers and sailors alike, put ashore on the Hampshire coast, and the invaders, so runs the old Chronicle, "killed men." Only three ships, but they were like the stormy petrel, warning of trouble to come. For nearly two hundred years after that, every man along the coast of England knew what it was to scan the sea for those fatal ships, which meant that they must gather in defence of their homesteads, or fly to the nearest place of safety, leaving house and home to be sacked by the pirates. Every spring-time they came, running their ships into the rivers and creeks, seizing horses, and sweeping over the land, carrying off the treasures of church and monastery, burning and devasting as they went. Sometimes, if their force were strong enough, they would form their winter camp in some place of defence, and stay there for months together, dashing out to slay and plunder when in need of supplies. Every boy and girl, from Northumberland to Devon, knew too well the meaning of the clause in their Litany—"From the frenzy of the Northmen, good Lord, deliver us."

And yet such is our power of growing accustomed to our circumstances, that, even with the risk of sudden attack always threatening them, the English folk of those days, so long as the trouble did not

immediately touch themselves, still cared chiefly for the little interests of their own family and village life. They were a home-loving people, and clung to their homesteads and fields, and were deeply concerned with the harvest, which might any day be swept away wholesale by a pirate raid. And there was one young mother wandering through the woods on a still, bright afternoon in early March, to whom nothing in the world was of so much importance as the sturdy three-year-old boy who clung to her hand, while he shouted with laughter at the crackling of the dead-leaf carpet beneath his feet. She was only a tall slip of a girl, this young wife and mother, with a fair, strong face, and a wealth of sunny, flaxen hair, put away under her matronly wimple. There was spring in the air that day, that first stir and flutter of spring that comes with the blackbirds' singing and the star of the celandine in the grass. And her heart was beating in quick, glad answer to the call of the wakening world. She was talking away to the laughing baby, such baby language as mothers have talked in all ages, bridging over a thousand years, and making us feel that people have altered very little, after all.

"Thou shalt be a great warrior, my little son," she told him, "as great a warrior as thy father, if that could ever be," she added softly, as if there were something treasonable even in saying such a thing. "Thou wilt stand by our dear king's side in battle, and help him when he drives the pagans out of the land for ever. And I would have thee a scholar too, for one may be both a soldier and a scholar, even as our king is, and thou shalt read great books in Latin, and

sing our own verse, and teach the folk wise things which will make all the land better and happier. And when they talk of the Thegn Elfric, and of how all men love and honour him, I shall be glad and proud as I think he is my son."

The child looked up at her with wide blue eyes, and laughed aloud as if he understood. There was a fallen tree just there, and she sat down upon it and looked up through the network of bare boughs to the clear pale sky. At her feet, under the sheltering coverlid of last year's leaves, green, crinkled points showed where the primroses were to be. The birds were stirring in the boughs, as if the spring in the air set them thinking of house building; the wood was full of joyous promise. Edburga noted it all and smiled over it to herself, while her little son caught up and scattered the brown leaves in rustling armfuls with shouts of delight. He was an enterprising baby, and he toddled away from her in search of fresh treasures, unchecked by brambles and withered fern as tall as himself. When he tumbled down he picked himself up again and scrambled on, and his mother watched him proudly, and let him fight his own little battles, ready to fly to his help if he came to serious grief. Suddenly he pulled up short, and seemed inclined to retreat to her side, then stood his ground, staring into the underwood and calling to her in baby language.

"What seest thou, little son?" she said, rising and coming forward, just as a hasty step rustled the leaf carpet, and some one came pushing through the thick underwood. Edburga caught her child's hand. She had not expected to meet any one here, and the name

TWO MOTHERS. p. 13

of a stranger had a sinister sound in those days. But the figure who came out beside her into the open glade was not by any means alarming. It was a girl about her own age, but smaller and paler, with a scared young face under her hood, and a bundle held tightly in her arms. Her dress was torn with brambles and stained with mud, and she limped painfully on the rough ground. She gave an exclamation of relief as she came in sight of Edburga.

"Canst thou tell me the way to Eastfold?" she cried out the moment she was within hearing.

"Eastfold! why, it is two leagues away," said Edburga, "and that is through the forest, where it is thickest. Thou wilt do better to follow this track, and skirt the wood, and that is as far again, only the way is clearer."

The stranger made a despairing gesture, and sank down on the fallen leaves at the foot of a great oak, with a little sob of weariness.

"Oh, I cannot get there to-night," she sighed; "I can never get there to-night. It will be dark long, long before, and I shall lose my way again, and fall into some evil."

Edburga was by her side in a moment. "Do not fear," she said, "thou shalt come home with me. My home is close by, and we will give thee shelter very gladly, and to-morrow one of my husband's men shall guide thee safely to Eastfold. Come home with me now, and rest and eat. Give me thy bundle. Why, what is it? Not a little child?" she exclaimed in surprise, as the cloak, falling back, revealed the sleeping face and downy hair of a two months' old baby.

"Do not wake her," sighed the other young mother; "she cries so often when she is awake."

"I will not wake her," said Edburga, hushing the little one with a gentle skill born of much practice. "Hast thou carried her all the way from Eastfold?"

"I lost my way," said the stranger shamefacedly, as if making a confession. "I only came out a little way into the woods because it was warm and bright and seemed like spring—and she sleeps best in the air—and I missed the path, and went wandering on and on until I thought to die of weariness or be eaten by the wolves when the darkness came."

"And thou hast had no food?"

"Not since this morning. I was not very hungry."

"Thou must come home at once," said Edburga rising. "Why, thou hast hurt thy foot—thou art lame! Hold my arm; it is not far. Elfric, hold mother's gown, my little one, and step out like a man. Do not fear; I have the baby safely. I have one at home, but a little older than she is."

The other girl's interest seemed to overpower her weariness.

"Hast thou two children?" she asked, as she limped by the side of her friend in need. "Thou art younger than I am, surely?"

"I was twenty-one on the feast of St. Agnes, and I have a son and a daughter," said the young mother proudly.

"Ah," sighed the other, "then thou art the eldest, after all. I shall not be nineteen till Midsummer. How happy thou art to have a son!"

"So I am," was the ready answer; "but my little

Eadgyth is just as dear. And thine, too, is a very fair little baby, though she is such a little one."

"Dost thou think so?" said the other wistfully. "My husband's folk do not say that. They call her puny, and some think she will die before the summer comes. That is why I try to take her into the sun, that it may warm her and give her more life. If she dies, then I shall die as well; but no one else will grieve at all, because she is only a girl. If I had a boy like yours, every one would love him. Your husband does not love your little girl."

"Nay, but in sooth he does," cried the young wife indignantly. "Sometimes I have to chide him for loving her best, because, forsooth, she is more like me. Why, he will dandle her himself in his arms and hush her to sleep as wisely as any old housewife of them all."

"What is thy husband's name?" asked the stranger, as if doubtful whether such an unusual person could really exist.

"Bernulf, Thegn of Woodbourne," said the wife, holding her fair head erect with a proud joyous smile, as if it were an honourable title she was claiming for herself. "But, see you," she broke off, "yonder is our home, and you shall rest and eat, and see my husband himself when he comes in from the meeting. And here comes the cowherd, who will give thee a stouter arm than mine to help thee down the path. He is a kind, faithful fellow; we shall give him his freedom some day."

She called aloud to a man dressed in a short tunic, much like the smock-frock of a labourer, and carrying a long, thick staff in his hand, who came out of a

thicket of elm and oak in the little valley below them. He turned sharply at the sound, and hurried to meet them with swift, swinging strides.

"I see you, lady," he said gruffly. "I was going in search of you even now."

"Why, what is amiss?" she asked. "Is the thegn returned from the meeting?"

"Nay, lady; I would he were. There are tales abroad of a Danish raid from the west."

The young stranger at Edburga's side gave a low cry of terror, and swayed as if she would fall. Her companion slipped her arm about her waist, and asked with a little thrill in her voice—

"Who tells this news, then?"

"Danewulf is come in with the swine, lady, and he says the word goes that there are villages in flames, and that the pagans ride southward again from Chippenham, for there is but little spoil left for them there."

"Ay, but they may not come, Osric, or Danewulf may have heard a lying tale. Such things grow fast enough in these days, and we may not lose head and heart directly, even if the thing were true. The sun is low and my husband will be here before it sets and bring good rede * for us all. Cheer thee, little friend, we have shelter yet to offer to travellers. Osric, aid this guest down the hillside. She has come far and is weary."

The serf, a broad-shouldered, stern-faced man, bronzed and scarred by old wounds and rough weather, took the tired stranger up as if she had been a child, and almost carried her down the hillside to

* Counsel.

the house door. The dwelling house was a place of some importance for those days, a long, low, timbered building, with a wooden palisade and trench about it, an imperfect defence indeed, but as much as the Saxons usually attempted. Two or three barns, a cow-shed, and the wattle huts inhabited by the serfs, made up the homestead. The whole little community were crowded about the house door, the men in anxious converse, the women clinging together or weeping over the scared, bewildered children. They were nearly all the weaker members of the community, Osric and the swineherd Danewulf, who had brought the news of danger, being the only able-bodied men who had not followed their lord to the meeting-place. Edburga came among them before they noticed her, walking swiftly with her light, firm step with her child by the hand, and the sleeping baby still in her arms.

"Come, good folk, good friends," she cried, "if the pagans were at the threshold should we bar their way by weeping and wailing? Is this what my lord looks for in those he leaves to keep house and home?"

They clustered round her in a moment, as if courage came with her presence.

"Ah, if the thegn were home!" cried one woman. "What if he have met them already?"

"He is like to find but ashes if he come not soon," wailed another.

"Better fly to the woods," cried a third. "Lady, come away, let us hide in the woods."

"Hide who will, I bide here for my husband," said the lady, firmly; "he will be here an hour after sundown. At least, let us be sure of the danger before we leave house and home undefended, and take our

little ones into the forest at nightfall. Let two of the lads hie to the crest of the hill and keep watch, and let us put some food and garments together, that we fly not from the Danes to starve and freeze in the woods. And here are guests who have lost their way and come to us for food and shelter. And they must rest, not stand here talking and weeping, that we may all go together, if need be we must go."

Her clear, quiet tones calmed them all. They started to do her bidding, standing aside for her to lead her guest into the great hall, the public room of a Saxon house. A huge log fire burnt in the middle, and tables were set, as if supper had been preparing when the alarm had startled the household. On a settle by the fire sat an old woman, too old and too deaf to be aware of what was going forward, spinning and crooning a lullaby while, with her foot, she pushed a heavy wooden cradle. She looked up as Edburga guided her guest to a seat on the settle and laid the baby visitor beside her own little one.

"Here is a guest for thee, my Eadgyth," she said playfully, with her light fingers touching her sleeping child's soft hair; "see thou make her welcome, and Elfric will rock them both, while Elwina helps to tend her mother."

Then, bending down to speak clearly into the old woman's ear, she bade her fetch milk and bread while, with her own hands, she took off the stranger's shoes and bound up the wounded foot. The old nurse brought milk and cakes, which had been baking on the hearth, and Edburga pressed the stranger to eat and drink.

"Dost thou think the Danes are coming of a truth?"

the girl asked fearfully, as she took the cup from her kind young hostess.

"Nay, I know not; we have had many a rumour that has come to nought. But my husband will be here to care for us all."

"He cannot save us if they come," said the other, with wide eyes of terror. "My father and my brothers were brave men, and good at arms as any in Northumbria, and they slew them and burnt our home, else I had never been here."

"Thou art from the north, then," said Edburga; "methought thy speech was not of our folk here."

"Nay, my home was in York till the pagans laid all waste, and then mine uncle, my father's brother, brought me hither and wedded me to Thegn Sexwulf; but I had liefer been a nun in one of our holy houses. There one can be quiet and not frightened of brawls and strife, or of angering those one is bound to please."

"Yet strife has come even to the holy houses," said Edburga; "the pagans spare them least of all. Have they not laid waste Ely and Crowland, and slain the good brothers who did no ill to any one? But, please Heaven, they will not come here. Tell me how to call thee, for we must be good friends, as our children are already. See how Elfric watches over them both."

"I am Wynflaed," was the answer, "and my baby is Ostritha. I have called her so for the sake of my sister, who is dead, for no one cares how I call her. If she had been a boy it had been different."

"Then thou and I must love her all the more. Now rest here and eat and warm thyself while I talk

with my folks and look if my husband be not coming. Elwina, care thou for these guests of mine till I come back."

She rose up with a nod and a smile and went out into the glowing sunset light. Already her bidding had been done; the women were putting such things together as they could carry with them in a hasty flight, the cattle were driven into the pen, the pigs into the yard, whence they would be turned loose into the woods on the first alarm, in the hope of saving them. Osric and Danewulf the lady kept near the house, sending out the lads in several directions on to higher ground to keep watch, both for the enemy and for the master of the house. She repeated over and over that he must certainly be back directly; he had promised to be there at least by an hour after sunset, and he never failed of his word. More she could not do, and, having set every one either to work or to watch, she went back to her guests.

Wynflaed had brightened up wonderfully under the influence of warmth and food, and sat by the cheerful blaze with her baby on her knee, herself rocking the little Eadgyth's cradle, while Elfric had fallen asleep on the floor, with his head pillowed on the skirt of her dress. She looked up and smiled as Edburga came in.

"She is asleep, and warm, and happy," she whispered, uncovering her child's face. "She would have died if I had not met thee when I did. Dost thou think, indeed, the pagans will not come?"

"I trust they will not," Edburga said, sitting down beside her; "but, at least, my husband will very soon be home."

"Thou lovest him very much," said the other young wife wistfully.

"Wherefore not? He is all the world to me," and Edburga's fair face flushed rosy in the firelight. "He is the bravest man that ever lived, and the wisest and the kindest. He fought under the banner of Wessex at Ashdown when he was but a lad, and he will help the good king at last to drive the pagans from our land."

"Deemest thou the king will fight again, then? My husband thinks he has fled the land."

"Nay, I know he has not," said Edburga warmly; "if we hear not of him 'tis that he bides his time, and makes him strong ere he call his brave men for another struggle."

"Sexwulf is brave," said Wynflaed, "but I am not, seest thou, and so I am afraid of him; I have always been afraid of him. And he was very sore displeased because my baby was a girl—he wanted a son, as all men do. If I had a son like thy beautiful little one here, he would like me better, mayhap. And she is not merry, she does not laugh, only smiles a little when I have her all alone. The cowherd's baby is as young as she is, and it laughs and looks about at the sun and the firelight. But my baby knows when I have her in my arms, and I sing to her when no one else hears. And she has dark hair like my mother's. She came not of the Saxon folk, my father wedded her among the Cumbrians."

She had forgotten her fear of the Danes as she pleaded her baby's cause to her sympathetic hostess. She was no more than a child after all, this poor little Wynflaed. Wifehood and motherhood had brought her their cares without very much of their

wisdom. As she had frankly confessed, she was afraid of her rough husband and scared and lonely in the new home, in which she had never attempted to rule as lady of the house. She was accustomed to being slighted and set aside, only she resented, with a mother's keen, bitter resentment, the want of welcome for her baby. That little helpless, puny thing might make a woman of her by-and-by. For the first time she had the chance of pouring out all her anxieties and hopes to some one who would listen and sympathize. She forgot all her fears as she ran on about the little one; how, though she did not look about her like the cowherd's baby, yet she was so quick to hear; what pretty hands she had, although they were rather thin; and what long lashes rested on her little white cheeks when she lay asleep. How she had been called by the name of Wynflaed's sister, who died long ago in the old Northumbrian home, and how the little granddaughter, when she smiled, had really a look of the British mother who had given Wynflaed her slender form and dark hair. And Edburga listened and sympathized, straining her ears all the time for the sound of welcome outside and of her husband's step and voice, while the sunset glow died out of the west and shadows crept up until the hall was dark, except for the patch of fire-light where the women sat. In the dusk Wynflaed had drawn nearer to her until her head rested on her shoulder. A great pity for the forlorn girl came over Edburga in the midst of her own growing anxiety, and her arm stole round her waist as if to guard both mother and child.

"Ah," sighed Wynflaed, "how good thou art! If

I could stay with thee for ever, if I need never go back!"

And then the door burst open suddenly, and Osric strode into the hall, while behind him pressed a crowd of scared faces reddened by the firelight. The cowherd's words sounded above a babel of terrified voices—

"Lady, you must away! Wilfrid has seen from the hill the villages ablaze between here and Ashton."

It was the town from which Bernulf was coming. Edburga trembled as she had never done at her own danger.

"My husband!" she faltered, springing to her feet.

"He must have met them," cried one of the frightened group.

"Then he will know; he will come."

"Mayhap he is slain. He is like to be slain and those with him, too; my son, too," cried an older woman, with a wail of terror.

"Whether he have met them or no we can make no fight here without him," said Osric. "Lady, we should be mad to try it. If you would see him again, away to the woods before they come. The lads have driven out the cattle. I will return and hide hereby and watch, and bring you word. Lady, for these children's sake, for us all."

"Oh, come, come, they will slay all the little ones, they have no pity!" cried Wynflaed, seizing her arm; "at my home they tossed the babies on their pikes. Come away, come away, we will carry them between us."

Edburga looked round at them all with white lips

and piteous eyes. It was terrible to have to go even in the face of the Danes, to leave her husband to find only the empty home. But, for the sake of the others at all events, it must be done.

"Where shall we go?" she asked of Osric.

"To the hunting shelter in the wood, lady; you have time to reach it, and it is well hidden." Then, with quick understanding of her thoughts, he added, "It is an old refuge. My lord would seek you there first."

She thanked him with a look, and hid her quivering face over her child as she stooped to lift it from the cradle. Osric caught up the boy, who half woke, and then nestled down in the cowherd's arms, as if he were well used to resting there. Edburga gave her hand to Wynflaed, and bade one of the boys help old Elwina. On the threshold the little group of women clung together, gazing with terrified eyes westward, where a fierce glow in the sky mocked the fading sunset. Edburga looked at it half-longingly. The enemy were there doing their dire work of destruction. Was her husband there, too, and she flying, not by his side? She turned away with a stifled sob, and led the way after Osric, who strode across the open space before the house and up the wooded hillside. The others followed as best they might, stumbling along in the darkness. One heard a sob now and then, or a child cried out and was hushed by its mother. But, as a whole, they were very quiet. They had grown up in days when the dread of such a flight was always before them; some had already known what it was to be driven thus from house and home; all had heard of such things from others; the whole scene had a terrible familiarity. Under the trees it

was very dark, though the sky looked through the bare branches. It was rough walking, too; brushwood and brambles caught at their clothes, and boggy ground gave way beneath their hurrying feet. Wynflaed limped painfully, hanging on Edburga's arm. They went forward for nearly a mile; then, in a little dell, they came upon something, looking in the dusk like a thicker growth of underwood, boughs roughly interlaced together and thatched with bracken, broken in a dozen places, as if it had long been disused as a shelter. Still it was some protection from the cold night air and the drizzling rain which had begun to fall, and Osric led the way into it, followed by the forlorn little company. He and Danewulf were to keep watch outside; the boys had been left half a mile behind, where the red glow of the burning villages could be seen through the trees, and where they could see any attack that might be made on the homestead below. Osric took up his post at the entrance. The women crouched together in such shelter as they could find, hushing the cold, frightened children. Edburga stayed nearest the entrance, straining her eyes into the darkness. The wind blew full in upon her, and she had taken off her cloak to wrap about the children who lay sleeping and unconscious at her feet, but she did not seem to feel the cold. She never moved until, in the dark, she felt the clinging touch of Wynflaed's cold fingers. The girl was feeling after her hand, and, with her quick instinct of helpfulness, Edburga bent down over her.

"Art thou cold?" she whispered.

"Nay, not very cold," was the faltering answer. "Dost thou think they will find us?"

"I know not; I trust my husband will come."

"They will kill us if they do. Art thou afraid to be killed?"

"I have not thought about it," she answered, truly enough.

"The others yonder are praying. Canst thou not pray, too, Edburga?"

"I do," she answered simply, though her prayers had not been for herself. "Let us pray together."

They clasped their hands over each other's while Edburga whispered familiar words.

"I have done many wrong things," sighed Wynflaed, as if longing to make a confession.

"And I, too, Wynflaed. May God have mercy on us."

"I hope, if they kill me, they will kill my baby too," said the younger mother, "for no one else will love her." Then, tightening her hold on Edburga's hand, she whispered eagerly, "If they should kill me and not thee, wilt thou care for my child? Thou art good, and wise, and brave—wilt thou care for her and teach her?"

"Hush, hush, Wynflaed! My husband will come—I know he will come—and save us all."

"Nay, but promise me, only promise me, if it be so," persisted the girl.

"If it be so, I promise," said Edburga gravely.

CHAPTER II

A Woman's Counsel

"It ought to be impossible for every noble youth . . . to love any one whose gentle counsel he cannot trust, or whose prayerful command he can hesitate to obey."—Ruskin.

EVEN as Edburga spoke, there came flying feet over the crackling leaves, the sound of breaking boughs, then quick panting breath close at hand, and the lad who had been left on guard at the outskirts of the wood dashed down the steep incline. Osric seized and held him.

"Be still!" he said in stern undertones; "what then! Where are they?"

"At the house," gasped the lad, between his sobbing breaths; "they passed me close."

"Did they see thee?"

"I know not; I fled from them."

"Young fool! Why couldst not hide thee and keep still? How many were they?"

"I saw not; they were mounted and rode fast. Ah, look!—look there!"

Even as he spoke there came a fresh glare in the

sky. A cloud of smoke and sparks rose above the home they had left. One woman burst into a wail of distress, but Osric checked her sternly.

"Be quiet!" he said; "keep still, if you care for your lives. They will find the place empty, and follow the boy, if they saw him, his track is plain enough to find;" and he looked bitterly at the broken boughs.

The women crouched down in trembling silence. Only Edburga held out her hand to the shamefaced lad. He was only a little fellow; it was natural enough that in his fright at the sudden appearance of the enemy he had rushed to join his friends without thinking that he might betray their whereabouts. She knew how he was thrilling and tingling with shame under the man's words, and even in the moment of terrible dread she had pity to spare for him.

"Courage, Wilfrid," she whispered; "they may not come, and if they do, thou wilt help to guard us. Stand here and watch Elfric."

She felt rather than saw the boy's grateful look. The quick, kind words of sympathy and confidence, spoken at such a moment, had won the lady a willing slave for life.

Then came a terrible few minutes of waiting, and holding breath, and straining ears for sounds. There was something to hear soon; roaring of flames and crashing of falling timber, and fierce shouts rising above it—shouts which died down and then rose again, surely nearer and clearer. Ten minutes of waiting, which seemed like so many hours, and then there was no doubt of it, the boughs were crashing on the outskirts of the wood. Osric stepped out a

moment from the doorway of the shelter, just as a yell of exultation went up ; they had hit upon the track. He turned back, and spoke fast under his breath—

"Lady, away! away, all of you! Hide in the forest ; they may miss you. There is no other chance."

The women needed no second bidding. They darted out, clinging to each other, and to their little ones, and sped away into the darkness, where the dense wood and the wild beasts were less cruel than their fellow-men. Edburga had her baby in her arms, and Danewulf was helping old Elwina. The lady turned to the boy Wilfrid, and bade him bring Elfric, and keep close to them. Wynflaed, clasping her child, stumbled by her side. Osric pointed to the right, and whispered to Danewulf.

"That way," he said briefly, "the wood is thickest."

"Comest thou not?" Edburga stayed to ask.

"Not yet, lady. For your life do not stay."

She knew he meant to cover their retreat. She could only obey, plunging into the darkness of the dense undergrowth, and whispering to Wilfrid to go first. Their progress was slow enough. The old woman hung more and more heavily, gasping out now and then a pitiful entreaty to her young lady to leave her. Behind them the sky between the trees glowed with lurid light, lighting the way, as it seemed to them, for their enemies to follow. To their terrified senses their forest refuge seemed as light as day, the shouts and yells sounded close upon their heels. That cry of exultation came again, and then the clash of arms. Wynflaed turned her white face to her companion.

"They are there!" she panted; "they will kill him!"

Even as she spoke she stepped on some treacherous ground and sank suddenly nearly waist-deep into mire and water, with an involuntary cry which she could not restrain. It took all Edburga's strength to set her safe on firm ground again, dripping wet, and with her shoes left behind in the deep mud. As they paused, not knowing where it would be safe to step, a fresh shout sounded from the other side. They were surrounded. It was useless going further. The faded bracken grew tall there, and Danewulf dragged them down into it, the old woman half dead with fright and exhaustion, the child-mother clasping her babe, Wilfrid and Edburga with the two little ones. They might be passed unnoticed in the darkness. But the darkness was darkness no longer. A fresh tongue of flame leaped up above the trees from the old hunting shelter, and in its red glow a man, in gleaming helmet, with his shining axe cutting his way, came springing through the trees. A torn cloak, which had fallen from Wynflaed's shoulders, hung on a low bough, a fatal signal of their whereabouts. With the roar of a wild beast in sight of prey, the Northman dashed upon the crouching group in the fern. Edburga rose up suddenly, and stood with extended arms, as if to cover the rest. The firelight gleamed on her white face and loose yellow hair. Again the shouts sounded from the other side. Edburga's clear, full voice cried aloud to the night sky—

"Lord, have mercy upon us! Dear Christ, have mercy upon us!"

Then the Dane's blow struck her down at his feet.

* * * * * *

Many days after that Edburga woke from what had seemed a long, painful dream, to find the dim grey light of the "wild March morning" stealing in through the unglazed window of the bedchamber where she lay. It seemed to her that it had been dark a very long time. It did not puzzle her that the hangings of the bed and the furniture of the room were strange to her, only she wondered, in a vague, dim way, about the carving at the foot of the bed, and what fruit it was meant to represent. Then she turned her eyes involuntarily to look for the rough crib and the wooden cradle at the bedside. They were not there, and their absence roused her as nothing else could have done. She turned her head to look on the other side, and there saw her husband seated beside her in a heavy carved chair. He was fully dressed, but his head had fallen back, and rested, roughly pillowed, against the hard wood. He was fast asleep, with his thick, dishevelled locks falling across his cheek and uncovered throat. Edburga lay a long time looking at him, without consciousness enough to be surprised at seeing him there, and with no recollection of the time before she fell asleep. But her faculties were slowly coming back to her. Very slowly the long-sleeping brain was beginning to awake. She moved at last, with a vague feeling that if it were daylight it must be time to get up. At her first stir her husband roused instantly, the light sleep of a man used to dangerous times serving for the nurse as well as for the soldier. He started up at once to find his wife's wide blue eyes looking

questioningly into his. He was on his knees directly by her side, devouring, as it were, every line of her face.

"Bernulf," she said, and her own voice surprised her, it was so faint and far away, "where are the little ones, my husband? Why are they not here? Is Eadgyth asleep?"

"Yes, my Edburga, she is well and asleep," he answered, with one of his broad, hardened hands clasping her white fingers.

"And Elfric, our son, where is he?"

He paused a moment, then spoke slowly, with bent head.

"He, too, sleeps well, my wife."

"And why art thou sitting by me here? Have I been sick?"

"Very sick, for many days, my Edburga. I bless God that He is restoring thee to me. Lie still, and speak no more now, that thou mayest grow stronger." He brought broth and wine, and fed her as tenderly and skilfully as any woman could have done, and she, satisfied by his presence, and by his assurance that her children were cared for, was content to rest and obey him. She slept, and woke to take what he gave her, and slept again, waking once more with all her perceptions clearer, and a dim sense of some recollection of fear or trouble that had been with her when she fell asleep. She was about to ask him how and when she had fallen ill, when her eyes caught something on which the sun, high now in the sky and streaming through the window, was gleaming. It was a cloak, torn and stained as if it had been dragged through brambles and over muddy

ground—a blue cloth mantle thrown in a heap on a carved wooden chest under the window. The sight of it brought a rush of recollection like a flood in upon the wakening brain, and Edburga started up, and clutched her husband's hands with a cry of terrified remembrance.

"The Danes!" she gasped, "the pagans; where are they?"

"Gone, my wife. Have no fear, they cannot harm thee;" and he held her close, in strong, reassuring clasp.

"Thou didst come then," she panted. "I said thou wouldst. Didst meet them? Didst find the house empty? I had not gone but for the others; they would not leave me."

"Thank Heaven thou didst," he said earnestly, still holding her.

"But Wynflaed, that is her cloak; is she well? I tried to hide her and the child. Ah, it is all coming to me," and she shuddered from head to foot with the recollection. "The man held his axe over my head, and I felt no fear, only that thou shouldst find me and be grieved. How was it? Didst thou come?"

"I came, Edburga," he said, seeing it was best to tell all since she knew so much; "Heaven was merciful indeed, love. They thought that blow had slain thee, ay, and I thought so too. I found thee as thou sayest, and but a few minutes after. We came from behind, we must have been within hearing of you when the pagans broke in on you."

"And the others?" she asked, as much with her eyes as with her lips. Bernulf knew that nothing

but the truth could satisfy her, and he told it like a brave man, holding her in his arms the while.

"My wife, God spared thee to me as by a miracle. There were none living when we came save thyself, the boy Wilfrid, son of Anlaf, and the two infants. Old Elwina had fallen across our babe as if to guard her, and the other poor soul had her arms about her child: 'tis marvellous how the frail things lived." Then, in answer to her look, he went on firmly—

"Thou and I must be more to each other. If our boy had lived to be a warrior we had wished him to fall in fight with the pagans."

"How died he?" she murmured.

"Dear heart, I know not. Danewulf and Wilfrid fled with him, and fell in with a band of the Northmen. There were other little ones amongst our people; they slew them all. Edburga, it has been over long ago."

"Thank God for that," she wailed. "Thank God for that. He is with the Holy Innocents now and does not feel it."

Her husband watched her anxiously. Both knew but too much of the wanton cruelty of the Danes. Horrors we cannot bear to talk of now were common enough in those days, and the father and mother knew they might well be thankful that, for the first-born son they had so rejoiced over, all suffering was long past. Bernulf's dread was for her, lest the life, so hardly given back to him, should fail again under the terrible discovery. Presently a woman came to the door and opened it softly, stopping on the threshold to gaze with surprise and interest at the two. Bernulf gave her a whispered order, and she

stole away, to return in a minute with the sleeping baby in her arms. The young father took the child himself and laid her gently by Edburga's side, and the mother's tears flowed softly and fast over the little unconscious head.

"All that we have now," she said; "must we not love her twice as much, my Bernulf?"

And she fell asleep calmly at last with the child still beside her, her fingers clasped lovingly over both the soft baby hands.

Having once aroused from her long lethargy, Edburga recovered quickly in spite of the shock and grief that had come with the awakening. Helpfulness was such an instinct with her that the sense of her husband's need of her seemed to call her back to life and activity at once. She knew so well what had been his pride in his promising little son, and, now that his anxiety for herself was less, he would have time and thought to spare also for the loss of his home. For the Danes had done their usual work of wholesale destruction. In their fury at finding the cattle gone, and some of the valuables removed, they had burnt the house and farm-buildings to the ground, and had revenged themselves furiously on the little band of fugitives. As Bernulf had said, only Edburga herself, the boy Wilfrid, and the two babies were left alive. Old Osric had given a good account of himself, and had delayed them for a few minutes by vigorously defending the door of the empty shelter, falling at last with his skull cloven by a Danish axe. Wilfrid owed his safety to the man who had fallen above him, nearly crushing his life out of him, but hiding him from sight, and Edburga had passed for dead as she

lay, stunned and senseless, among the fern. There her husband found her when he and his band, who had come home by a more roundabout way to avoid a flooded river, heard the shouts of the conflict, and saw their dwellings before them a mass of flames. He had carried her into safety, half frantic at the thought that he was too late to save her, and returned to find that the enemy had mounted their horses, and were gone like a whirlwind, as they had come. He had left some of his followers to do the last sad offices for the dead, while the rest helped him in the task of carrying those for whom there was still hope to the nearest fortified place, where they might be safe from another attack and find help and shelter for the wounded. The Danes might return or be followed by their companions, and the poor defaced bodies of women and little ones must be laid to rest at once to save them from further insult. Some of the thegn's men, who had their own terrible interest in the work, had done it as reverently as time allowed, while the rest formed a body-guard for their master and those for whom skill and care might still avail.

They reached the city of Winchester at dawn, to find the ready help and sympathy which are learnt in the face of a common danger, and there Bernulf nursed his young wife back to life, with a skill and a tenderness which amazed the women folk and the doctor. And now that thought and remembrance had returned to her again, it was her turn to cheer and strengthen him, and not him only, but all the little community among whom she found herself. Her own home life had been so sheltered and so happy that she had hardly realized to the full the

fear and anxiety that shadowed all the land. Now it had come home to herself, she was bearing her own share of the nation's sad burden, and, like the brave, loving woman she was, she began directly to stretch out hands of help and sympathy to those suffering like herself. There were women there who had themselves lost husband or children in the last Danish raid, there were fugitives driven from their homes, nuns who had fled from sacked convents, orphans left to the charity of strangers. They began to look upon the pale, sweet woman, who rose up from her bed of sickness to move about among them as a sort of compassionate saint or ministering angel with gentle words of sympathy for the grief that she knew herself. One of her first inquiries was for the little motherless baby who had lain in her own child's cradle.

"Her mother bade me care for her," she said. "It is all dim and dark to me, what happened that day; but I am sure of that—I promised to watch over the little one if she died. Poor Wynflaed! I did not think when I brought her home it would be for this; but belike she would have met the pagans alone had she not come to us, and she would have been the more afraid."

"She did not look as if she feared at the last," her husband told her. "Oswin, who lifted her up, said her face was as that of a sleeping child. The pagans were more merciful than their wont, and their work was soon done. We brought the child hither; but its father, the Thegn Sexwulf, came to seek it, and bore it away."

"Wynflaed said he did not love it," sighed Edburga.

"She vowed the poor babe would have none to care for it when she was gone."

"The child may be more precious now," said Bernulf. "The thegn is not young, and this little one alone bears his name. When thou art stronger we will seek him out, and he may lend thee the child to companion our Eadgyth. They say he himself goes over seas."

One person for whom Edburga had the most tender sympathy and comfort was the lad Wilfrid, the only one left of her husband's house servants, except those who had been with himself. She had not forgotten his bitter shame at having inadvertently betrayed their hiding-place, and guessed at once what made him keep out of her sight, hurrying away with averted face whenever she appeared. She caught him one day alone before the fire in the great hall of the house where they had found shelter. He was sitting on the ground with his chin upon his hands, gazing gloomily into the red embers, and so wrapped in his own sad thoughts that he did not hear the lady's soft step till her hand was on his shoulder. Then he started to his feet and stood before her, with bowed head and his hands clasped over his eyes.

"Wilfrid," she said gently, "thou and I must have to say with each other."

For answer he sank upon his knees before her, hiding his face against the border of her kirtle.

"Oh, lady," he murmured, "I doubted thou wouldst never speak to me more."

"Wherefore not?" she answered kindly, sitting down on the heavy oak settle by the hearth. "We

have suffered together, Wilfrid, thou and I, and so must needs be friends."

"It was my doing," sobbed the lad, still with averted face; "it was I who turned craven and betrayed you all. The little lord's death is on my head, and how canst thou and the thegn pardon me? Wherefore are they dead and I, the one who slew them by my cowardice, am left here? Would the pagans had killed me! It would have been better so."

"Nay, not so," said Edburga gently, and her thin fingers stroked the boy's flowing hair with a caressing touch. "Those who died, died by the Will of God, Wilfrid, Who doeth well all things that He doeth, and it is by His Will also that thou and I are spared to work yet for His glory and the good of our fellow-men. Let us see to it that we do the work He sets us, Wilfrid, and bethink ourselves that He Who overrules all things had doubtless a wise purpose in the sparing of our lives."

The boy lifted his face from his hands and looked up at her earnestly.

"The thegn," he said under his breath; "ay, and all good men, how should they look upon me?"

"How should they not, Wilfrid? We all know thou art no craven. Older warriors than thou have been surprised ere this. And the brave man's part is not to waste his life mourning over one mishap, but to rise up and do better."

"I would die for you and yours, lady," said the lad passionately.

"Ay, I know it, Wilfrid; and thou wilt do more, thou wilt live for us, and keep thy master's head and mine in war and in peace."

He looked up eagerly into the fair face as he knelt at her knee, then sprang suddenly to his feet as steps and voices sounded without.

"It is my lord," he said, with drooping head and crimson cheeks.

"Ay, Wilfrid, and thou art not going to fly him. He has others with him, perchance they bring us news."

As she spoke Bernulf entered, in company with his host and followed by a band of men, friends and neighbours, evidently in anxious consultation. The young thegn came straight to his wife's side.

"Here are tidings, my Edburga," he said. "Thou wert right, Alfred the king has not fled the country, nor is he dead or sleeping. We have one without who has been with him where he has strengthened himself through the winter in his camp among the marshes, and, now that spring is breaking, he has called upon the men of Devon and Somerset and such others as have heart for a fresh rally, to band together in another struggle with the pagans."

"And thou art answering to the summons," she said, smiling bravely up at him.

"It is thereof we are debating, lady," said Ethelweard, the elder man; "we have seen so many rallies and struggles which have ended in making the yoke of our land yet heavier to bear. This very king has once and again beaten the pagans and what have we to show for it? It is but stemming the flood for a while to bring it yet more strongly upon us."

"The king's counsel is wont to be good," said another. "I fought beside him at Ashdown when he

was yet the Atheling,* leading under his brother. He was but a lad then, and he is young yet. Still he bears more brain than most. If he have a good hope one might yet strike another blow with him."

"King Burhred of Mercia thought otherwise," said Ethelweard; "he has left throne and kingdom for the Danes to work their will upon."

"So also has Sexwulf of Eastfold, and we might more of us do the like," said an older man, gloomily, "and seek our fortune elsewhere than here, since the curse of Heaven seems to lie on the land."

The colour rushed into Edburga's fair face. She looked up at her husband who stood beside her.

"Thou dost not think this," she said softly.

"I know not what to think, my wife. Sooth to say, I have thought it might be wisest to take what I love to some safer land than this. But I waited to hear what thy word would be, knowing that thou ever redest † wisely."

The other men, standing in a group before the hearth, turned involuntarily as he spoke, a circle of gloomy anxious faces, towards the girl-wife who sat erect in the great chair with the firelight glowing on her flushed cheeks and shining eyes. It was as if in their doubt and irresolution they longed for some one to guide them to a decision. Edburga spoke after a moment.

"It seems to me rather," she said, "as if God had some great thing in the future for this land of ours, since He tries us so sorely. May it not be His will that we should thus grow a mightier nation than if we lived a soft and easy life? Has He not given us

* Prince. † Counsellest.

this fair land that we may make it a great and Christian country, shedding His light on all the world, and may we then turn away from His great task? I am only a woman, and young and not wise; but it seems to me as if the great Lord Who put us here calls to us through this king. I should like other nations to say in years to come, 'this English folk are a great people, because when they are beaten they do not know it, and when they have work to do they will do it to the end, even if they have to fall often and rise again and to spend all they have, if it be their very heart's blood.'"

Her face glowed as she spoke, and her eyes shone in the ruddy light. Ethelweard looked round upon the group.

"Methinks," he said, "that if I held the faith of my pagan forefathers I had said that the lady here was one of the wise women, who had their knowledge from the gods in Valhalla."

"And since we are instead Christian men of England," said the older thegn, "why may we not say that the lady is yet a wise woman, and has her knowledge from no false gods but from the great Lord of heaven and earth Who speaks to pure hearts."

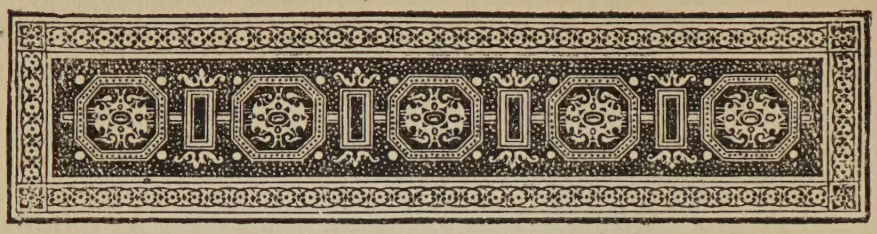
"Wherever it comes from, it is the right rede for me," cried Ethelweard's son, a bright-faced lad of eighteen. "I am for Alfred and another blow at the Danes, ay, as many as it may need to drive them back over seas."

As he spoke he drew his sword, flashing out, a line of light in the firelight, over his head.

"I am with you, Cedric," cried another.

"And I, and I," rose the voices of young and older men in chorus, and one after another the swords flashed out in the dusky hall.

"And I," said Bernulf, drawing his sword too, and looking down at the slight figure beside him with a great pride and tenderness in his eyes. Edburga looked up and smiled back at him. The cost to her might be something heavier than the heart's blood which these men were ready to give for their country. But, in that hardest of all the work that goes to make the greatness of a nation, Englishwomen, thank God, have never failed.



CHAPTER III

"ENGLAND'S DARLING"

"England's darling,
England's shepherd, England's King,
Alfred, them he truly taught
To live in duty as they ought.
Wise was he, and choice in speech,
First of England skilled to teach."

Early English Verses.

FIFTEEN years had passed away since the little band of thegns had cast in their lot with King Alfred at the bidding of a woman. The work they had pledged themselves to do, when they drew their swords in the fire-lit hall, had been gallantly done. The kingdom of Wessex had been cleared of the Danish invaders, and those of them who had been allowed to remain as settlers in the country had embraced the Christian religion and settled within the bounds of East Anglia. Part even of that territory had been cut off eight years later, when the king punished a rising among the Danes by reclaiming for himself the city of London and fixing the river Lea as his boundary as far as Hertford.

In this very neighbourhood one golden afternoon in September, a boy and a girl were sitting side by side on a grassy mound beside that great Roman road to the north known then, as now, by the name of Ermin Street. One could almost fancy that time had turned back, and that Edburga was wandering once more in the forest above her old home, this girl bore so strong a likeness to the fair-haired young mother. There was the same slim erect form, the same abundant yellow locks, and though she must have been some five years younger than Bernulf's wife had been on that February day, yet her black kirtle, and the shadow of grief and loss on the fair face, made her look older than the happy young mother had looked before the Danes sacked her home. The boy who sat at her feet might well have been, with some ten added years, the baby who had played among the fallen leaves that February afternoon. He was a straight-limbed, sturdy lad, with frank face, and a mass of curly hair about his shoulders—a very pleasant thirteen-year-old copy of the thegn Bernulf. He sat with his bow across his knees, his fingers playing with the string, while his blue eyes gazed earnestly down the long white road. Once he bent down as if to listen, with his ear against the short green sward.

"Dost hear anything, Alfgar?" asked his sister quickly.

"Nay, I hear nothing yet. Sure they should be in sight before long. 'Twill be sundown in an hour, and the king lies in London to-night."

"There is time enough yet," said the girl; and then, with a hand on her brother's shoulder among

the flaxen locks, she asked, "Hast thought well what thou wilt say, Alfgar?"

"To be sure I have, Eadgyth; it is not hard to know. I am here to offer my service to my lord in the place of my father."

The girl's blue eyes grew misty, though her lips were smiling.

"Did Wilfrid tell thee to say that?" she asked.

"Why should I ask Wilfrid?" said the boy, with a little proud toss of his fair head. "I can speak to my lord Alfred without taking my words from Wilfrid."

"Hush, Alfgar, hush! Wilfrid is our best, kindest friend. Dost thou not mind what my father said?"

"Ay, Eadgyth, I mind it well; but it is I, not Wilfrid, who am my father's son, and shall one day be king's thegn, and must take his place. Why, Eadgyth, thou art weeping again! I will not let thee weep; my father never would. I had done better to leave thee with mother when I came to meet the king."

"Nay, I will not weep, Alfgar; and I am glad to be with thee here," said the girl, smiling as she dried her wet eyes. "Ah, who comes? Why, it is Wilfrid."

As she spoke a young man of six-and-twenty came towards them along the road, and both rose to meet him.

"Ha, Wilfrid, when comes the king?" cried the boy, as soon as he was within hearing. "Shall we not see him, after all?"

"He comes close after me," was the answer; "I saw the dust of their horses from yonder hill." He

paused, and looked down thoughtfully on the boy, who stood straining his eyes along the road, and flushing with eager excitement.

Eadgyth's eyes passed from her little brother to the face of the new-comer, as if seeking for some reassurance. And indeed it was a face the very sight of which would give confidence and support—the best type of Saxon face, quiet and strong and strenuous, with a depth and earnestness unusual in so young a man. The tall, well-knit form was that of a warrior well seasoned to fighting and hardship—the fair skin was tanned by exposure to sun and weather, the blue eyes, while they faced you frankly, still kept their own secrets, and the strong lines of mouth and chin told of a man steady, self-reliant, and wise beyond his years. Eadgyth's upward look of perfect trust and confidence told of an old-established friendship, and a regular habit of appealing to him for help.

"Dost thou think all will be well, Wilfrid?" she asked.

"Ay, wherefore not?" he answered quietly. "The king is just and noble, and held your father dear. But it were well to lose no time lest others gain his ear first, and he be led to speak words hard to unsay."

"Whom dost thou fear, Wilfrid? What foe have we that should hinder the king from doing us right."

"No foe, Lady Eadgyth, but one that has eyes on thy father's fair heritage. Hast heard the lady, thy mother, tell of Sexwulf, who was Thegn of Eastwold?"

"He whose wife took refuge with our mother, and

died the night the pagans burnt our home? Surely I have. What of him?"

"He claims the lands of Hartington, which belonged to his kin before the Danish folk settled in East Anglia. And some say he would fain persuade the king that Brockstede lies on the bounds of his own holding, and were better ruled by him than by—a lady and a child not come to years."

"Dost mean that he will work upon the king to take from me the lands my father earned in his service?" cried Alfgar, with his fair face in a flame. "Villain that he is! let him wait but a few years! Does he think my father left none but babes behind him, to be used as he pleases and speak never a word? Shame on you, Wilfrid, to stand and tell me so, and ten thousand times shame on a king that gives ear to such villainy!"

"Hush, hush, Alfgar!" cried his sister and Wilfrid together; and Eadgyth added, "Surely our father's son should better know the king."

"I do but hear what Wilfrid said," answered Alfgar rather sulkily.

"Nay, Alfgar, Wilfrid spoke no word against the king, nor would our dear father have brooked such a word. He always vowed the king was the noblest and worthiest man on English ground. No fear but he will do us justice."

"No fear of anything but right and justice from Alfred," said Wilfrid warmly; "and yonder, see, he comes."

As he spoke, the advance guard of the troop crested the hill, and came spurring down the road towards them,—a little group of horsemen, quickening their

pace to announce the king's coming. A royal progress in those days was a slow and cumbersome proceeding, and the train which now came in sight over the hills was long and varied. There was the armed guard necessary for safety when, besides the dangers of outlaws and robbers, there were such troublesome neighbours as the Danes to be considered. There were the thegns in constant attendance on the king, priests and clerks, huntsmen and falconers to manage the chase in the royal forests, and, in Alfred's case, the scholars and foreign guests in whose talk the king delighted. Sumpter mules and waggons carried the royal necessaries, spears and headpieces flashed back the lowering sun, and Alfgar, quivering with excitement by the roadside, watched them pass with the eager delight of a boy whose life had been spent far from camp and court.

Eadgyth's eyes hardly noticed anything until Wilfrid, touching her arm, pointed to the heavy banner behind which two horsemen rode abreast. He pushed Alfgar gently forward.

"Yonder," he whispered,—"he in the red tunic, on the right hand."

The boy waited for no further instructions. In a moment he sprang down the bank into the road, and, darting in front of the right-hand rider, barred his way with outstretched hands, crying, in his shrill, childish voice—

"Lord king, hear me for my father's sake."

There was a general reining up of all the party near enough to notice the interruption, but Alfgar and Eadgyth saw only the grave and kindly face of the rider in the red tunic, with the coroneted headpiece

upon his long, fair locks. He had been engaged in animated talk with his companion, but he broke it off instantly, and turned with full attention to the boy before him.

"What is your will with me, my fair child?" he asked; "and in what can I aid you?"

"Lord king," the clear, child's voice replied, "I am your faithful man, as my father was before me, and I will be foe of your foes and friend of your friends, and serve you in peace and in war, with sword and with substance, as he did."

A titter of suppressed laughter sounded among some of the menials in the royal train, though the nobler men, who rode near the king, looked rather touched than amused. Only one tall, red-bearded man, who rode near the standard, remarked, with mock seriousness, that the king's crown would surely sit the safer for the support of so stout an arm.

"For the service of so stout a heart it surely will, Thegn Sexwulf," said Alfred, turning his serious blue eyes in grave rebuke upon the speaker. "It is such loyal, whole-hearted service that best keeps the throne."

And then, looking down kindly on the boy who stood at his stirrup, he asked his name and kindred.

"I am Alfgar, son of Bernulf, lord king," the boy answered readily,—"he that fought with you at Ethandune, and helped to rout the pagans at Rochester, and had from you the lands of Brockstede, when you drove the Danes back after the rising, eight years agone. And, with your good will, I will hold them against the pagans as stoutly as he did."

The red-bearded thegn moved his horse a little nearer to the king's.

"By my lord's good leave," he said, "the sun is westering, and we have yet far to ride, by a road that is none of the best after nightfall. It were an ill thing for us to let our king be overtaken by the night before he reaches the shelter."

"It were a worse thing for the king had he no ear for his faithful subjects' business," was the grave answer. "Ride thou on, Thegn Sexwulf, and announce our coming; and thou, Alfgar, son of Bernulf, tell me the rest of thy matters, and why thy brave father, my most trusty thegn, comes not himself to meet me?"

"My father is dead," said the boy, with a sudden shake in his clear tones which he tried hard to control. "He died, four weeks since, of the fever that has been in the land. He would fain have died in battle, and my mother tried so mightily to cure him, but—but——"

The boy broke down suddenly, in spite of valiant efforts for courage, and hid his face in his hands. King Alfred touched his bowed head with a hand as gentle as a woman's.

"His soul is in the hands of God, my child," he said tenderly; "and the same God will in mercy keep and comfort those he leaves here. Be it thy aim to follow in his steps, and it will be well with thee, living and dying. Art thou his only child?"

"Nay, my lord; my sister is here," said Alfgar, lifting his tear-stained face, as Eadgyth came shyly forward.

The king dismounted, and went to meet her.

"Thou art the daughter of a brave man and trusty friend of my own, lady," he said kindly. "I have not forgotten how he came to me in the hour of my need at Athelney; no, nor how we parted when the pagans had fled before us at Rochester. 'Twas even then I spoke of making his home my resting-place when I passed next this way, little thinking that he himself would never bid me welcome there. How does your noble mother, the lady of whom he has so often spoken to me?"

"My mother is brave, my lord, for our sakes," said Eadgyth, "else I think she would be fain enough to be where he is gone."

"Ay, 'tis sometimes a harder task to live than to die," said the king, with a half sigh, "and calling for a stouter heart. Yet I remember, when I thanked your noble father for his loyal service, he told me, once and again, that the thanks were owing rather to her who sent him forth. Have you any stout kinsman to aid you now with counsel and protection?"

Eadgyth turned to Wilfrid. "Here, my lord, is my father's trusted follower, to whose care he committed us."

King Alfred had the royal gift of a good memory.

"It is no new face to me," he said readily. "Thou hast fought stoutly beside me with thy lord once and again, if I mistake not. The thegn was well advised when he named thee guardian of his best possessions. How left he his lands?"

"To my lady in trust for his son, my lord," answered Wilfrid promptly; "and prayed you that his will might be respected."

"He did well," said Alfred; "and while my word

stands in England, none shall gainsay their right. What following had the thegn?"

Wilfrid explained; and the king, signing to his company to move forward, walked on himself, keeping Alfgar's hand in his own, while Eadgyth walked beside her brother, and Wilfrid led the king's horse.

"This is all well," he said, after one or two more questions: "the son of my comrade in arms will be a loyal king's thegn, if not to myself, yet to my son. Wilt use thy father's sword against the pagans, boy?"

"Ay, my lord, till our land be cleared of them," was the ready answer.

"That may be in thy day, God willing. And wilt serve thy country with head as well as with hand? How is thy mind for book learning?"

Alfgar's response was not quite so ready, and his sister answered for him—

"He is trying hard to learn now, my lord, since it was my father's will."

"But Eadgyth can read both the English and the Latin," said Alfgar; "and play upon the harp, and sing too."

"That is well," said the king smiling; "so is there at least one clerk in the household. And who has been the lady's teacher?"

"My mother, my lord. She knows far, far more than I do, and has taught us both."

"There, then, we are alike," said King Alfred kindly: "to my mother's wise thought do I owe mine own first will to learn. Well do I mind her smile when I came to her knee, a proud lad enough,

to claim the book she had promised to the first among us who would repeat the verses in it. Ay, 'tis the mothers, even more than the soldiers, with whom rests England's greatness. Mind you that, fair maid, when you have babes of your own about your knee. And think you this lady mother of yours will vouchsafe me one word as I pass on my way, though it be a breaking in upon her rightful sorrow?"

Both boy and girl hastened to exclaim that their mother would be but too much honoured.

"Yonder is our home," Alfgar said, pointing beyond them as they came round a bend in the road. "With your leave, my lord, I will run forward and tell her."

He was gone without waiting for permission, flying like an arrow down the road, towards the moated building which stood on a little rise above the village.

"A fair, free-spirited lad," said the king, smiling, to Eadgyth. "There is much of his father already about him. May he grow to be such another."

"Ah, my lord, that is what my sweet mother prays," said the girl earnestly; "and at times she weeps and fears lest she be not wise enough to train up a warrior without a father to guide him."

"If it be her will to send him to court," said King Alfred, "his father's son shall be welcome among mine own. Many a good thegn's boy shares their schooling, and he should have good masters and the chance to learn. Alack, that the chance and the will go not ever together! 'Tis the grief of my life that in the days of my leisure I had no teachers,

and that now, when I may gather wise men about me, the leisure is hard to find. But such care and guidance as my own children have shall be your brother's, if ever your lady mother will."

Eadgyth faltered her earnest thanks. It was not difficult to talk to this king, who, for all his stateliness, was so gentle and so kindly. She even found herself telling him of her father's illness and death, and of how desolate the home was without his cheery presence. They reached the village, where the people were crowding to their doors and standing by the roadside to see the king pass, and there Alfred bade his train await him, while, with Eadgyth beside him and Wilfrid following, he turned aside to where the thegn's house stood above the cluster of cottages. As he reached the gateway a black-veiled figure came forth, led by the eager Alfgar, and bent low in respectful welcome.

"Pardon me, lady," said the king, in his grave sweet tones; "I had not thrust myself upon your grief were it not my grief too."

Edburga looked up at him with misty eyes. Fifteen years, full of many cares and anxieties, had aged her less than the last six weeks. It was these days, and not the war times, which had brought the silver threads among her yellow locks, and changed her from the happy-hearted young matron into a gentle, sad-eyed woman, with the dividing line of a great sorrow cutting her off from her youth.

"Ah, my lord," she said softly, "he would fain have died in battle for you."

"God calls each man when and where it best befits him, lady," was the reverent answer. "What Bernulf

would have done, my young thegn here will carry on."

And, giving his hand in stately fashion to the lady, the king led her, with her children following, out of sight of gazing eyes into the house.

Wilfrid stood leaning against the gatehouse, looking after them, while eager talk rose all round him, praises of the well-loved king and leader, and satisfaction among the serfs at his favour to the family of the late master. Eager questions were asked about the business which had brought Alfred to the East. The Danes were on the coast again, and the king was demanding hostages for the good faith of the East Anglian settlers, who were wont to become restless when their countrymen were in the neighbourhood. Wilfrid was not much of a talker, and only nodded in reply when he was appealed to, but he was the first to hear the king come out, and was ready in a moment with his horse. Alfgar came eagerly forward to hold his stirrup, and Alfred's hand rested for a moment on the boy's fair hair.

"God bless thee, child," he said tenderly, "and make thee a true warrior and worthy man, as thy father was."

Then, as Wilfrid gave him the reins, he turned to him—

"Thou wilt keep thy master's trust full loyally," he said. "If thou needest aught that I can do, come to me."

"Ay, my lord," said the young man readily; and his grave face cleared wonderfully as he watched the royal train ride down the hill.

"Wilfrid," cried Alfgar eagerly, "why didst thou never tell me what like he was?"

KING ALFRED'S VISIT TO BROCKSTEDE p. 56

"Did I not?" he asked smiling.

"Nay, that thou didst not. He is more noble ten thousand times—I would die for him to-night."

"Thou wilt learn to live for him, which is better still, boy," said Wilfrid, with his grave smile.

CHAPTER IV

Guests at Brockstede

"A face with gladness overspread,
Soft smiles, by human kindness bred,
And seemliness complete, that sways
Her courtesies, about them plays."

Wordsworth.

IT was four months since King Alfred and his train had passed the homestead of Brockstede. The days were drawing out now; February rains had washed away the snow, and the work of early spring was being done on the farms. Ploughing and sowing were going forward, and Alfgar found long days in the woods with hawk or hound much more interesting than reading lessons and the getting by heart of poetry and psalms. The lady Edburga did her part bravely, overseeing all the work as her husband would have done, visiting pasture and stackyard and storehouse herself, as, indeed, she had been used to do when he was absent at camp or court. Where she went Eadgyth went with her, with cheery words and smiles of encouragement for men and maids. The girl was a good type

of a pure-minded, happy-hearted English maiden, so simple herself that life came easily to her, so loving by nature that it required no effort for her to welcome and think well of her fellow men. She had much of her mother's quiet courage, the courage of many a brave woman to whom duty, however hard, is just the natural thing to do, so much a matter of course that she hardly thought of bracing herself to do it, never dreamt of vaunting herself when it was done. She loved and revered her brave father with all her heart, and had mourned his death bitterly, but with a simple certainty that he had gone to his reward, and must still go on loving and caring for her. She thought of him, and took the same pleasure in pleasing him as when of old she had claimed his praise for some piece of work done in his absence. He was in her thoughts one clear, still evening as she came along the river bank towards home. The sun was low, and lay in a line of gold along the river between the green banks. Eadgyth, looking up, remembered how the spears of the king's followers had caught and flashed back the light. How glad her father would be to think of the king walking down the road to Brockstede, with herself and Alfgar beside him; had he not said over and over again that no such leader had ever arisen in England, and that no better model of truth, and courage, and purity could be set before the eyes of English lads? How he would rejoice that the king had promised to befriend his son, had offered to receive him at his own court, where, as Eadgyth knew, he himself superintended the studies of the lads whom he called the hope of England! She smiled joyfully to herself as

she thought. She had no fears of Alfgar's failing to satisfy them all. Was he not his father's son, and had he not the king to copy, and his mother and Wilfrid to guide him? How brave he was already, and, if he was inclined to be a little headstrong, he was so affectionate that he would soon learn to give up his own way to please those he loved. And here Eadgyth stopped suddenly to listen, for a sound of singing came upon her ears from among a grove of tall poplars further up the river. Some one was singing snatches of some wild old song, in a voice as clear as "evening blackbird's full-toned lay," and, as Eadgyth looked, the singer came out from among the trees and across the grass towards the river. She was a girl of about Eadgyth's own age, but smaller and slighter. Her dress, unlike the rich and graceful attire of the thegn's daughter, was shabby and disordered, and her thick, dark-brown hair hung in dishevelled locks down to her waist; the veil, which most ladies of good birth wore in the open air, having fallen off was hanging about her shoulders. She went forward, now walking, now running a few steps, looking straight before her, and singing as she went, no connected song, but snatches of music, sometimes without words. She did not seem to notice Eadgyth on the bank of the stream, though she was only a few yards from her; and Eadgyth stood still, watching the strange figure, until, to her surprise and dismay, she saw the girl going straight, without a pause, down the bank to the water. She gave a quick, involuntary cry of warning, yet the stranger, though she started at the sound, took no notice of it, but plunged straight forward, as if intentionally, headlong into the water. She

sank and rose struggling further out in mid-stream. Eadgyth, who had her wits well about her, rushed down into the water, knee deep, waist deep, grasping the tall reeds, which grew just there like erect sentinels along the bank. She clutched the figure borne past her by the stream, and managed to seize, first a handful of the wild hair floating far out on the water, then the clothes, to which she clung with all her might. But the weight was heavy, and her own footing insecure. She could not stir, could only drag the helpless figure towards her and hold the head above water, though her own arm seemed breaking with the strain. She had screamed once for help, she dared not turn to see if any one were coming, all her energies were absorbed in clinging with one hand to the bending reeds, with the other to the dead weight of the drowning stranger. But her cry had been heard; there were swift steps on the bank, then the water splashed high as some one plunged into the river. The next moment Wilfrid was taking the weight from her arm, holding her up too, as she slipped and nearly fell backwards among the reeds.

"Take her," she gasped, loosening her hold of him to cling to the bulrushes. But Wilfrid, towering above her, had the other girl upon his shoulder while he held Eadgyth's arm, and dragged both together to the bank.

"Heaven be thanked!" he said simply, as he laid his senseless burden on the grass. "I thought thou hadst fallen ere I could reach thee, Lady Eadgyth. What took thee there?"

"The maiden," panted Eadgyth, who sat on the bank, dripping from head to foot. "I know not if she

meant to slay herself, she walked straight into the water."

"If she meant to slay herself 'twas pity to thwart her by the death of thee," said Wilfrid, rather grimly.

"For shame, Wilfrid! Wouldst have me stand by and watch so evil a deed? Pray Heaven we were in time! Turn her face, so that the wind may reach her. Ah, that is well, she revives already."

Indeed the girl, whose head she was raising, began to stir and gasp for breath, and then to stretch out her hands with frightened, helpless gestures.

"Fear not, thou art safe," said Eadgyth cheerily, as she bent over her; "we will have thee home to the fire, and all will be well."

"Where am I? Where am I?" asked the stranger piteously. "Methought it was the sea. I heard it."

"Nay, thou didst fall into the river," said Eadgyth soothingly. "See, thou art here on the bank and safe."

"I cannot see," was the answer, as the girl turned her face away.

"What ails her? Has she lost her wits?" whispered Eadgyth, in bewilderment.

But Wilfrid was looking into the wide, expressionless eyes.

"Poor maid," he said pitifully, "she is blind, Lady Eadgyth. 'Twas thus she came near drowning herself, she could not see."

The ready tears came to Eadgyth's eyes. She leaned over the young stranger and kissed her tenderly.

"Pardon me, pardon me; I did not know," she

said. "Thou shalt come to my mother and we will all tend thee, and thou shalt tell us how thou camest to be abroad alone. Wilfrid, do thou carry her. Have no fear, dear maid, Wilfrid's arms are strong. There, thou art quite safe, and I hold thy hand."

And she stepped along by Wilfrid's side, despite the soaking garments clinging round her feet, and gently caressing the cold, limp hand she had seized in her own. She only loosed it when they reached the gate to run on in front and prepare her mother for the arrival. Hospitality was both a sacred duty and a necessary law of society in those days, when inns were rare and every chance traveller might claim, at least, food and shelter, and such a case as this made the strongest appeal to the motherly heart of the lady of Brockstede. All the women of the household hastened to assist as the forlorn stranger was borne to one of the bedchambers, small, detached rooms, built round the great hall, while Eadgyth would hardly leave her side to change her own soaking garments. The girl seemed stunned and dazed, submitting to be undressed and laid in the great carved bed, but not attempting to speak.

"It is a strange thing," the Lady Edburga whispered to her daughter, "but I could vow I had seen the poor maid's face before. Even the frightened look she has, and little wonder, poor child, is the same. 'Tis like some evil dream of trouble and fear, that comes back to me when I look at her."

"Wilt thou not ask her name, mother, or tell her thine, and perhaps she may remember."

"Nay, we will not trouble her yet. Methinks the different voices fright her, and well they may,

when she sees no one. I shall soothe her best by myself."

And she dismissed the kindly talkative women, clearing the room of all except herself and Eadgyth, who knelt still beside the bed. The silence certainly seemed to reassure the blind girl. She ceased to turn her head from side to side as if bewildered by the voices, and lay still, with her long dark hair about the pillow, only the thin fingers moved as if feeling after something familiar, until Eadgyth clasped her hands in her own. Then she asked suddenly—

"Who is here?"

"Thy hostess, my child, Edburga of Brockstede," said the lady gently, "and my daughter Eadgyth, who helped thee in the water. Do not fear, thou art safe now."

"I did not fear," said the girl dreamily. "I felt the water all round me. Methought it was the sea. I heard it break on the shore."

"Thou didst hear the wind in the poplars," said Eadgyth; "folks who know say it is like the sea. Wert thou seeking for the seashore?"

"Yes, I thought I would go on till I found it. Is it far away still?"

"Far away from here, my child," said the lady. "Is thy home there?"

"Not now," was the answer; "but I do not love this home. I love the sea; it talks to me."

"What is thy name?" asked Eadgyth, her curiosity about this strange maiden becoming unmanageable.

"Ostritha, daughter of Sexwulf, Thegn of Hartington," said the girl, as if she was repeating a lesson.

"Daughter of Sexwulf!" exclaimed Eadgyth; while Edburga suddenly gathered the young stranger into her arms and kissed her forehead.

"My little one," she said tenderly, "well might I think thy face familiar. Thou hast lain in my arms ere now, my child, and thy mother spoke to me her last words on earth."

"I have no mother," said the girl in the same mechanical way, as if the words had been taught her.

"Not here, my poor child, but a mother thou hast in Paradise. Her last thought on earth was to save thy life."

"Mother, is it the babe that came to us that night?" whispered Eadgyth, with eager eyes.

"Ay, my daughter, the very same that lay in thy cradle."

"Ah, then we are bound to be friends indeed," said Eadgyth, with her soft cheek pressed against the hand she held. "I have no sister, and thou must needs love me and let me love thee. See now, thou shalt share my bed to-night, as thou didst all those years ago, and thou shalt tell me everything that has happened since then, and why thou wert seeking the sea."

"To-morrow, my child, to-morrow," said Edburga. "To-night she must rest and learn to trust us to care for her the second time. See here, my little one, we will send one of the serfs to tell thy father thou art well and safe, and thou wilt be content and bide with us till he needs thee back."

"Yes, I will bide with you," said the blind girl slowly; "it is quiet here. I do not want to go back."

She started with the quick, sensitive hearing of the blind, as a step sounded without and a whispered voice came to the door.

"Lady, supper is served, and Father Wulstan is here, and a stranger with him from over seas."

"Comes the stranger with the good father?" asked the lady. "Has my son bid him welcome?"

"To be sure he has," said the woman, one of the elder servants who had known Alfgar from his cradle, "as fair and courtly as his own father might have done. Indeed, they fell in with them as they rode home from the hunting, and my young lord bade them to supper and bed. But indeed it is the strangest man, some outland scholar, who comes from over seas with but his books and his harp. And he speaks our tongue strangely and hath foreign ways of his own. Heaven send he be no wizard or evil being!"

"That is scarce likely, Alswyth, since he comes in the good father's company," said the lady smiling. "But I will myself bid them welcome, and do thou, Eadgyth, care well for our guest meanwhile."

"As well as thou thyself, mother," said the girl readily. And she took her mother's place by the bedside, while Alswyth arranged her lady's dress and the black veil which covered the sunny hair out of sight. Then silence fell upon the bed-chamber, except for the distant sounds from the hall, and the sighing of the wind, which found its way through the unglazed windows, making the light flicker and stirring the heavy hangings, after a fashion that

would be considered uncomfortable indeed in a bedroom of the present day. But Eadgyth, who had never seen any dwelling more luxurious than her own home, considered herself magnificently housed, and sat this evening by the pillow of her young guest in much pleasure and contentment over the charge committed to her. She had heard from her babyhood the story of the child laid by her side in the cradle on the night of the Danish raid, and the thought of the forlorn little one, whose mother had died when her own was spared, had caught her imagination. How strange it was that things had so come about, that she had been allowed to help the daughter as her mother had tried to save the mother! Surely there was some mysterious link between lives which had thus twice crossed each other. She knew that the lady Edburga's tender heart had yearned many a time over the little unloved child, spared when her own had been taken and commended to her by the girl-mother. She would have opened her arms to the baby if she could, and taken it into the vacant place. She had spoken this evening more like her old self than she had done since the father died. And Eadgyth's thoughts roamed away, and the quiet tears gathered in her eyes as she thought of what he would have said and done, and a drop fell on the hand she held in her own. Ostritha stirred and turned her head, with the quick listening movement of the blind.

"Why art thou weeping?" she asked abruptly.

"I was thinking of my dear father who is dead," said Eadgyth simply. "He would have made thee welcome."

"Didst love him so dearly?" asked the strange girl.

"I love him now; I shall love him yet better for ever," was the ready answer. "There is no father like him in all England." And there she checked herself with a sudden recollection of what she had heard of Sexwulf's indifference to his only child.

"I loved Torfrith," said Ostritha; "she is dead too. She was my nurse. When my father went over seas she took me to live with her kin. They were fisher-folks by the seashore."

"How long is she dead?" asked Eadgyth gently, as she paused.

"It seems a long time," sighed Ostritha, "a long, weary time. My mother's kin made my father fetch me hither. I would they had left me there, but Elgiva says they cried shame on him, and he had to fetch me home."

"Who is Elgiva?"

"The serving-maid who combs my hair. Oh, how she hurts me sometimes! But she says, if she can dress me and make me fair enough, my father will find me a stout husband, who will wed me though I go blind all my days."

"Dost thou want to be wedded, then, Ostritha?"

"Not I," was the answer—"at least, I care not so I go away. I hate our hall; I cannot find my way as I could in the old hut. I knew everything there, and I could set the table and scour the platters. Elgiva says that maids of high degree should work with their needle, but I cannot learn. And my father hates to see me there; I can hear his voice when he looks

where I am. And his people flout me. That is why I ran away to-day, and then I thought I heard the sea and I ran to it, for the little waves on the shore used to be my friends and kiss my feet, and it would be better to be drowned in the water that puts its arms about you and wants you, than to go back where all folks wish you away."

"My poor Ostritha, no, no. That is like poor heathen folk, who know not that God cares for them. Folks who fear the true God do not slay themselves."

"I fear Him," said Ostritha, with a shudder. "He punishes those who steal and lie and disobey."

"Ay, dear maid, but He loves us, too, as a good Father loves His sinful, silly children. Did none ever tell thee that? Canst thou not say the 'Our Father'?"

"I learnt it once—I have nigh forgotten it. Torfrith taught me, but when she grew old and sick, she forgot to make me say it. Hark! what is that?"

Her face lightened as with sudden sunshine, and she sat up as if listening intently. Across the open space from the hall came a strain of music, the clear, thrilling notes of a harp. Eadgyth went to the door and opened it, and the sweet chords came to them more distinctly.

"They are singing," she whispered. "We have not sung in the hall since my father went from us. Oh, hark! that is none of our folks. Sure it is the outland stranger."

As she spoke a voice of rare beauty rose in harmony with the sweeping chords, singing some stirring battle strain in an unknown tongue. Such singing had

never been heard before in the hall of Brockstede. The two girls listened entranced, Ostritha with an intensity of delight which transfigured her whole face and made her another being from the dreary, half-wild girl of a few minutes before. As voice and music ceased she gave a gasp of regretful pleasure and longing.

"Is it not wondrous music?" said Eadgyth, while a roar of applause rose from the house servants in the hall. "I am glad he is come. My father ever loved music, but we have had no courage since he went to touch the harp. Hark! he sings again. Ah, this is different! 'Tis holy music this time and a song of our own, the 'Dream of the Holy Rood.' Sure he sings as the blessed saints sing in Paradise."

Ostritha never moved. She lay on her pillow as if spellbound, her sad, uncontrolled young face falling into peaceful lines. In the hall, too, the stillness was complete, and in the silence of the night the listening girls could hear the very words of the beautiful Saxon hymn, which tells how one in a dream heard the blood-stained cross speak of the weight it had once upheld, even the form of Him Who in death was yet the Mightiest of Victors. When the hymn ceased, there was no burst of applause such as had greeted the battle-song, only a long, low murmur that was not far from tears. Eadgyth, kneeling by the bedside, laid her head on the pillow beside her guest's.

"When I was a little, little maid," she whispered, "my mother made me learn those verses to pass the time while my father was with the king, fighting the pagans at Rochester. I mind well how I stood by his knee to say them to him when he came home,

and that he told me the king loved them and had his own children learn them, and praised them well when they had them by heart."

"Canst thou sing those verses?" asked Ostritha eagerly.

"Ay, to be sure," was the answer. "I have no voice like that stranger guest, but I have sung that song many a time. But thou canst sing; I have heard thee."

"Not songs like that," said Ostritha, shaking her head. "Wilt thou teach me?"

"Ay, that I will; I will teach thee all I know, Ostritha, and so will my mother. But thou art weary, I can tell thou art, and, for my part, I am ashamed to own it, but my eyes are closing for all I can do. Methinks the music has put a charm on us both. I will say my prayers, and then we will sleep together as we did once before."

She rose from her knees, but the blind girl's hand closed over hers.

"Do not go away," she said piteously. "I cannot feel anything I know."

"I will say my prayers here by thy side, dear heart," said Eadgyth tenderly; and she knelt again and repeated her evening prayers aloud, with the stranger's hand still in her own.

When the lady Edburga came to ask after her young guest, she found the two heads side by side on the same pillow, as the baby heads had rested on the night of fear and loss sixteen years before. There was a smile on Eadgyth's lips, and her arm was thrown about the other girl as if the instinct of welcoming and protecting were strong, even in her sleep. There

was great tenderness in Edburga's eyes as she bent over them.

"God bless ye both, my maids," she whispered softly. "Surely 'tis by no chance, but for His wise purpose, that ye cross each other's paths thus again."

CHAPTER V

The Strange Singer

"God sent His singers upon earth,
With songs of sadness and of mirth,
That they might touch the hearts of men
And bring them back to heaven again."

LONGFELLOW.

IT is a fact full of meaning that the Saxon part of our English race gave us the word "home," that word so peculiarly English in its sound and its sense. For the Saxons, fighting nation as they were, were a home-loving folk, who would lay aside sword and axe to use plough and harrow on the fields they owned, who dispensed open-handed hospitality in the hall where wanderers were all welcome, and who gave to the mistress of the house the proud title of "lady," or "loaf-giver," as to one whose highest honour was to provide for her household and for the hungry souls outside her own circle. Such a home it was of which the lady Edburga was taking up the reins with loving courage in these sad days of her widowhood. The brave woman who had sent her husband

away from her to fight for his country when her first great sorrow was still fresh, was not likely to fail now that he had left her to be master and mistress both of the home he had won. She moved about in her black dress and veil with the bunch of keys at her girdle, watching over and directing men and maidens, giving instructions to swineherd and cowherd, overlooking the spinning and milking, with that quiet, methodical attention to little things which is the mainspring of a well-ordered household.

It was a stormy morning, with a wild gale tossing the bare boughs and bringing sudden heavy rain-showers to blot out the distant view.

At the upper end of the hall Alfgar, with rather a bad grace, was examined on the progress he had made in his studies since the last visit of Father Wulfstan, the parish priest, who had been absent on a visit to an outlying hamlet. Wilfrid, on a settle near the fire, was repairing his bow, but all the time following with quiet, watchful eyes the lady of the house as she moved about upon her household duties. And it might be noticed that whenever she required advice or assistance, and turned, as if naturally, to consult him, he was at her side in a moment without waiting to be summoned, ready with some practical suggestion, or prompt to remember anything she had forgotten. On the other side of the hearth sat the stranger guest who had come with Father Wulfstan. He had a book on his knee, but his eye wandered often from it to follow the lady as she busied herself about the hall, or to cast amused glances at the good father's unwilling pupil.

He was undoubtedly a remarkable-looking man, so

unlike the household of his hosts as to be clearly of another race. His age might have been two or three and thirty, but his slim, lithe figure and the laugh which came so readily to lips and eyes, made him seem almost boyish in a time when men grew early to the gravity of middle age. His features, though too irregular for actual beauty, had an air of distinction, and his face was attractive from its eager, vivid life. The eyes under the straight black brows blazed and danced like dark fires, and their expression kindled and softened from one moment to another, as sunshine and shadow flit over a hillside. His dress, somewhat different in make and material from those around him, was worn and soiled as if with travel, but the hilt of his dagger and the heavy gold collar about his neck were of delicate workmanship, and looked like heirlooms of some proud family. Wulfstan had presented him by the name of Conan, son of Diarmaid, a Scot, or, as we should now say, an Irishman, on pilgrimage to the court of the great King Alfred. The good father had, moreover, whispered to the lady Edburga that the young man was a scholar of great skill and learning, driven by feuds and strife from his own land, where all his kindred had fallen either in a Danish raid or in some fierce family quarrel. He had drifted, half dead with hunger and exposure, in an open boat on to the English coast, and was now making his way to the king, whose ready welcome of all travellers and men of learning was known throughout the civilized world. He spoke the Saxon tongue, though with a foreign accent, and seemed to have a happy faculty for making himself at home. Already he had taught

Alfgar a new fashion for cutting the feathers of his arrows ; he had turned back the sleeves of his shabby tunic, thereby showing gold bracelets of quaint and beautiful workmanship, and helped with the skill of a good forester in skinning the deer, while his singing had set the whole house talking. Eadgyth, who had as yet only heard the wonderful music from her chamber, had already been given marvellous accounts of the stranger by all the maids in turn, and came in no small curiosity to see for herself, leading her new friend by the hand, just as Alfgar's painful spelling of long words had ended for the twentieth time in a tremendous yawn. The lazy young scholar gladly seized the opportunity of escape while his sister bent her fair head for the good father's blessing.

"Well, my daughter," said the priest kindly, "and so I hear thou hast been doing the part of the Egyptian princess of old, and drawing treasures out of the water."

"Nay, father, I would I had," said Eadgyth, smiling. "But Wilfrid had to lift us both out, else I fear we had never won to shore."

"Good Wilfrid, he is ever at hand when he is needed," said the father. "And is this the treasure that ye brought to land between ye?"

"Ay, father, this is Ostritha," said Eadgyth, guiding the girl beside her to bend too before the good priest.

"May our heavenly Father bless thee, my child," said Wulfstan, with a hand on the brown locks, "and consecrate to His service the life He has spared."

Ostritha lifted her head with one of those swift,

listening movements which spoke for her as a look does for others. Then, as Conan rose from his seat, she turned quickly in his direction.

"Ah, my son," said the father, smiling, "the maid is looking for the voice that sung her to sleep yesternight. I fear me thou art one of those wizards the old tales tell of, who draw all folks after them."

"'Twere an evil thing if I did, father," said Conan, in the sweet soft tones with their strange accent, "seeing I should be like to lead them far, and into strange places, with little profit to be won. Methinks I should do better to guide them to this safe haven here, and there leave them in good hands. But at least you cannot blame me for beguiling your scholar from his book, since he fled before these two fair maids, and not after me. I had best follow him, and see whether I have any witchery that will avail to draw him back."

And he went out into the rain, with that gay laugh which was so infectious that the hearers were almost bound to echo it. Whether or not he made any attempt to bring the truant Alfgar back to his lessons, it was long before either of them returned; however, Eadgyth, a far better pupil than her brother, brought her wooden stool to Father Wulfstan's feet, and asked eagerly to see the book he had brought. It was a copy of part of that glorious possession of our English Church, Bede's "Ecclesiastical History," and Father Wulfstan said, with a smile, that Alfgar would owe his thanks to the king, who was rendering it into English that the unlearned might have the stories in their own tongue.

Meanwhile Eadgyth, whose attainments were far in advance of Alfgar's, bent with delight over the pages, and read, first in Latin, then, with Father Wulfstan's help, translating for the benefit of Ostritha and some of the maids who sat by with their spinning. A new book was a rare and priceless possession in those days; but, even now, the pages which the monk of Jarrow wrote for those who should come after him, asking only the prayers of his countrymen in recompense for his labours, have lost none of their charm.

The lady Edburga came from the kitchen and sat down, distaff in hand, to listen. The servants drew softly nearer, and Ostritha sat at Eadgyth's feet with her intent face turned towards her, while she read of the servant of Christ, the Abbess Hilda, whom all that knew her called "Mother," and of how Caedmon, the poor cowherd, who left the supper board in bitterness of spirit because he could not take his turn in singing, was taught by a Power, not of this earth, to sing wondrous verses, telling of the "beginning of created things." One quaint sweet story after another she read, while her audience listened untired, for the love of stories was strong in the simple hearts of those days as it is in child hearts to-day. Once Wilfrid came to the door, and made a sign to the lady Edburga, who rose and went away softly, unnoticed by the group of listeners.

"Oswin is returned from Hartington," he said briefly, turning from the lady to the man who had carried to Sexwulf the news of his daughter's escape.

"What said the thegn, Oswin?" asked Edburga, gathering from Wilfrid's manner that the message was not a pleasant one.

"Truth, noble lady," said Oswin, an old falconer, and a privileged member of the household, "the thegn was in little state to say aught, having but just ended his supper and taken somewhat more than his share of strong ale. But, with some little ado, we made him to understand the peril his daughter had been saved from; to which he answered that the wench might have bided in the river bed for aught he cared, and that 'twas ill done of any who took her out of the water to offend his eyes."

"Said he so?" exclaimed Edburga, her gentle face all aflame with indignation.

"He did in truth, lady, with other words about your noble house which I will not blister my tongue to utter, and methinks his very serfs felt shame of him, for they came about me and would have me down the hall to their own table, though I vow a morsel of food under that roof would have choked me. And anon there came a serving-maid, fair enough of face and glib of tongue, who bade me think naught of what the thegn said, for his talk after supper was apt to have little meaning in it, and he would thank the lady Eadgyth to-morrow for saving his only child from such a mischance, and would send an escort of his folk to bring the young lady home."

"That is doubtless the maid the poor child spoke of," said Edburga, turning to Wilfrid.

"Very like," he answered thoughtfully; "and

doubtless 'tis true enough that the thegn's words were not meant for outside ears. Yet men in drink are apt to speak their thoughts over plainly."

"His thoughts are well enough known in the country-side," said Oswin. "I lay the night in the hut of his swineherd, whom I knew of old, and he and his wife have tales enough to tell of what count the thegn sets on his daughter. He had liefer she had died with her mother or been lost among the fisher folk who reared her. 'Twas her mother's kin forced him to own her, but 'twas sorely against his will, and there are some who have heard him rail against Heaven for cumbering him with a blind wench for his only child until 'tis a marvel he be not stricken down in judgment for his evil words. Only of late some one has put the thought into his mind that he might make a rich marriage for the maid, if he can find a man to take her, all useless as she is, and maybe win a powerful friend thereby."

"And so sell a human soul for gold or credit," said Wilfrid shortly.

"I trow he would sell her into slavery if 'twould advantage him," said Oswin, "and moreover, lady, the folks with whom I lodged gave me fair warning that the thegn wastes no love upon your house. He had hoped to be beforehand with the king in the matter of the lands, knowing little of Alfred's fashion of doing justice, and he is not like to forgive any who thwart him. You, lady, would do well to have a care of him."

"That has been my fear already, Oswin, and yet I fear him not, for our title here is good and sure, and approved by the king, who has promised his

protection to my son, and moreover I have good and tried friends all about me;" and she looked, with her sweet confident smile, from one to the other. "Yet," she went on, "I would have you keep this talk between ourselves. If ever the peace be broken between us and our neighbour yonder, let not the strife begin here, as it might do, did some of our hot-blooded younger men get knowledge of what words had been said. Let us be ever ready to guard, but slow to strike. And, for the poor maid, she is welcome enough among us so long as she may bide. I would she might be spared to us altogether, as indeed I desired when her mother left her to my keeping."

"That will never be, for all our lady's good will," said Oswin to Wilfrid, as Edburga went back to the hall.

"Wherefore not, if the thegn be so fain to be rid of the maiden?"

"Because, in the first place, being greedy of gold and lands, he will wed the wench to one who can pay for her, and, in the second, he would lose all he holds dear sooner than pleasure Thegn Bernulf's widow."

"Is it so strong as that?" said Wilfrid thoughtfully.

"Ay, that is it. He has never pardoned our thegn for casting in his lot with the king before the dawn of the good days, when he in his wisdom thought the cause lost and stirred no hand or foot to aid him. Alfred is not like to forget who stood his friend in the time of need, for all he may be ready to welcome Sexwulf now, and so the thegn found

out last autumn. Friends of Bernulf may trust him now as the lamb may the wolf, if I be not mightily misled."

"Forewarned is forearmed, Oswin," said Wilfrid smiling.

"Ay, against open force," said the falconer bluntly; "one can face the wild boar, but the ways of the fox take more watching."

"Then must we learn some of that wisdom of the serpent whereof we hear in Holy Writ," said Wilfrid; "and meanwhile, Oswin, the less said the better, as our lady said, and her wisdom is worth that of us all together; the first blow must not come from our side."

"So it be not a blow in secret," quoth Oswin, under his breath, as he turned away to feed his young hawks.

Wilfrid looked after him thoughtfully. The man was as faithful as an old dog, with something, too, of the same grumbling, suspicious temper. He might be overrating Sexwulf's ill-will. It was well known that the thegn coveted the lands of Brockstede, the reward of the service which he himself had failed to render in the time of the king's need, and Wilfrid felt that there might be another cause of jealousy in the contrast between the brave young son, who would carry on Bernulf's name, and the blind daughter who was Sexwulf's only child. Had the king foreseen danger from that quarter when he bade Wilfrid watch well over the household of his late lord? The king was a powerful friend and protector, but the times were unquiet, and his own throne never secure from foreign invasion and home revolt. Wilfrid could but

wish that Alfgar were already safely at his studies among the king's scholars, as Alfred himself had suggested. He knew enough, however, of his young lord's disposition to be aware that any suggestion of sending him away for safety would rouse all the quality of stubbornness which Alfgar had inherited in full from his Saxon forefathers. Nor did Wilfrid wish to alarm the lady Edburga, and induce her to lay her direct commands upon her son. He must wait and watch events, make use of any opportunity that offered to satisfy himself as to Sexwulf's ambitions and intentions, and meanwhile he decided to confide his anxieties to Father Wulfstan, who was the trusted friend and adviser of the family, and as renowned for his sagacity in worldly matters as for wisdom and insight in questions of faith and doctrine. He was leaving Brockstede that day on a summons from the Bishop of London, and Wilfrid seized the opportunity to escort him to the bounds of the township, an office which should perhaps have been Alfgar's, but the young gentleman was not to be seen at the moment, being, perhaps, rather afraid of receiving some parting admonitions about more attention to his books. The priest heard Wilfrid's suspicions, and shook his head. It was likely enough, he thought, though Sexwulf was just now high in general favour. It might certainly be as well if Alfgar were under the king's immediate protection. Alfred himself was in camp, watching the Danes, who had effected a landing the year before at two points on the Kentish coast, and were awaiting their chance to raid further inland. Still Alfgar would be safe enough at the royal vill of Winchester with

the king's sons. Could he be sent with sufficient escort?

"I would go with him myself, Father," said Wilfrid "if it were not——"

"If it were not for leaving the homestead and those there, thou wouldst say. 'Tis very true, my son, the lady has few besides thee to look to, being but poor in kindred. 'Twere better to wait some strong band travelling to the Court who will take the child in their company."

"I trow that would suit my young lord's taste better," said Wilfrid smiling; "he will hardly brook the journey in charge of his father's servant."

"The boy is young, and has yet to learn his best friends," said Father Wulfstan; "'tis ill for a lad to be without his father's hand over him. But the lady Edburga is a wise woman, and between her and the king and thee, Wilfrid, the boy will learn to tread in Bernulf's footsteps yet."

The guest who had come with Father Wulfstan to Brockstede lingered there after the priest had gone, being welcome enough to the whole household. No messenger came from Sexwulf that day, nor the next, at which the lady Edburga and her daughter knew not whether to be more pleased or indignant. It was shameful indeed that Ostritha's father should give no sign of satisfaction at her safety or desire to fetch her home; but at the same time it was delightful to have Ostritha herself in their hands to protect and caress in such fashion as the poor child had never known.

The wind had risen to a gale at night, and the rain was dashing against the house and falling hissing into

the fire through the hole in the roof which did duty for a chimney, when the boards and trestles which formed the table were put back, and the household gathered round the hearth to pass the evening with song and story. Eadgyth, sitting at her mother's feet, strung and tuned the harp which had been silent since her father's death, and sang one of those lays by which the bishop singer, Aldhelm, strove to win to holy things those who had no ear for sermons. She began shyly, with a frank apology to the guest who would take little pleasure in so weak a voice, but as she sang she forgot her present audience in tender memories of him who used to praise her singing, and the little tremor in her voice made the song all the sweeter. And Conan, who had never heard it before, asked eagerly for it again, that he might get the words by heart, as many a song and story passed in those days from generation to generation without ever being written down. And he listened with delight to the tale of Aldhelm singing on the bridge, as if he had been a wandering minstrel rather than a learned monk, in the hope that some heedless passer-by might be caught by the verse and give more thought to the holy things of which he sang.

"And now our guest will take the turn," said the Lady Edburga courteously, and a murmur of approval went round, for no such singing had ever been heard in the hall of Brockstede as they had listened to the night before. And Ostritha, who had never moved while Eadgyth was singing, turned her head now towards Conan, with a look as if her hearing were doing duty for the other sense she lacked. And Conan struck his harp and sung first in his native tongue, but with

such fire and earnestness that even through the unknown words, his listeners could hear the clash of swords on helmets, the shouts of warriors in deadly battle, and then the long wail of women weeping over the slain. The last long sobbing notes died away in the howl of the wind without, and Conan looked round smiling at the awed faces in the red firelight.

"I must needs sing some Christian lay," he said, "or you will say my countrymen are mere pagan folk who can do naught but shed each other's blood. Now I will try the morning hymn of Patrick, the teacher, the servant of God, who came over seas to bring the Gospel to those who once made him their slave. I have tried to bring it into the English tongue, and you must pardon me if the words are rude."

And with that he sang, in softer tones, the familiar prayer of the Apostle of Ireland.

"In my work to-day,
May the Hand of God protect me,
The way of God direct me,
The shield of God defend me,
Christ with me,
Christ before me,
Christ after me,
Christ in me,
Christ under me,
Christ over me,
Christ at my right,
Christ at my left."

"So you see," he ended, smiling, "we too have our saints and our hymns to set beside yours, though, in

courtesy to my good hosts, methought it was fitting to let their Holy Rood speak first."

"I would hear that again," said Ostritha half under her breath, and turning to Eadgyth as if to ask her to make the request. But Conan had caught her words and touched his harp again to the familiar strains.

"Girded Him then the youthful Hero
That was God Almighty.
Strong and firm of mind
He mounted the lofty gallows,
Fearless in the sight of men.
I was all stained with blood,
Poured from His dear side.
The warriors left me there
Standing with blood-drops streaming,
With missiles all wounded.
They laid Him down limb weary,
They stood by the lifeless Head,
Beholding the Lord of Heaven."

As Conan's beautiful voice, reverent with the mingled glory and pathos of the verse, ended the last words, the blind girl turned suddenly away, and hiding her face against Eadgyth, burst into tears, and Eadgyth, whose own eyes were misty at the recollections belonging to that song, rose, with her arm round her new friend, and led her from the hall.

When the evening gathering had broken up, and the fire was dying down in the hall, where many of the household servants lay sleeping on straw flung down as rough bedding round the red embers, Eadgyth and Ostritha, in their little chamber, were

awake and talking in whispers far into the night. For to Sexwulf's daughter that day had been an entrance into a new world. While she was yet softened and half bewildered by the tenderness shown to her by her new friends, there had come to her the revelation of the Love beyond earthly love, the "God's Possible" which "is taught us by man's loving." The poor child's teaching had been little enough up to now. The past fifty years had been evil days for England, and the learning which had been fostered and shed abroad by the monastic houses and the schools attached to them, had been checked everywhere by the ravages of the Danes. The old nurse, who had watched over Ostritha's childhood, had but the vaguest recollection of that Creed and Lord's Prayer which, by the decree of Archbishop Theodore, every English child was bound to learn; indeed her ideas of the Christian Faith were strangely mingled with old superstitions about charms and spells, and relics of the ancient belief in Thor and Woden. Things familiar to Eadgyth from her babyhood were all new to Ostritha. The vivid imagination and eager enthusiasm which belonged to her Celtic blood were all on fire, and her torrent of questions half frightened her gentle friend, who longed for Father Wulfstan to answer them aright. It was the old story, the attractive power which overcomes, not from fear of punishment or hope of reward, the power which wins heathendom for the truth, the unspeakable attraction of the Cross, the blood-stained rood bearing the weight of the world's sin, of which Conan sang by the hall fire. And then, as ever, came the longing for sacrifice in return. What should she do, the girl cried

to Eadgyth, what had others done for Him Who did that for her? So, as they lay in each other's arms by night and walked next day by the riverside in the stillness which followed the storm, Eadgyth, from her recollections of the Father's stories, told her how Edmund, the Martyr King of neighbouring East Anglia, was bound to a tree and pierced by Danish arrows rather than deny his Faith. How Oswy of Northumberland prayed Heaven have mercy on the souls of those who slew him; how Etheldreda, the princess, left the glories of the world, to work and pray in the convent at Ely.

"That will I do," cried Ostritha, as she heard. "I shall wrong none, for none need me. My father would fain have me gone. I will tell him I will it too, and I will seek out some house of holy nuns and there learn more of all this that I have never heard, and fast and pray and serve like Hilda and Eanflaed thou didst tell me of."

"Yet is there much in the world that one may do for Him," said Eadgyth reverently. "Father Wulfstan has ever said that it is all His service. And our king, if he be no martyr, as pray Heaven he be not, is in very deed a saint."

"Ay, that is so for him, and for you who are strong," said Ostritha; "he can lead armies against the pagans, and thou and the lady here can guide the house and aid the poor. But I, who am a poor, helpless wench, who must ever be led through the world, what can I do? No; I will pray my father to send me to a convent, and the Sisters will teach me to pray and praise as they do, and I shall be happier than ever in the world I thought to be."

And Eadgyth and her mother, knowing something of the lot of the weak in troublous times, could not but feel that their young guest's choice might well be a wise one.

CHAPTER VI

In the Woodman's Hut

"Blessed life, which holds its happiness
In succouring others."

LEWIS MORRIS.

IT was certainly a strange coincidence which had brought to the hospitable house of Brockstede at the same time two guests in some respects so much alike as Conan and Ostritha. Both had the love of beauty and the vivid imagination of Celtic nations, and also that capacity for enthusiastic devotion and the attraction towards the mystic and the spiritual side of life which has helped to make saints. There was, of course, a wide difference between the man, keen for stir and change, sure of his power and used to a life of strife and turmoil, and the shrinking girl, yearning after love and rest and shelter. And Conan had, besides, a good deal of his countrymen's happy-go-lucky nature and confidence in the favouring winds of chance good fortune, with a keen sense of the humorous, and a pleasure in the enjoyments of life which all his troubles and bereavements had not been able to destroy. But, in spite of their points

of likeness to each other, the two strange guests seemed more attracted by the different nature of their hosts. Ostritha would hardly leave Eadgyth's side, following her about at all her household work, from bower to hall, and garden to dairy, and, though Conan's music thrilled her through and through, it was to Eadgyth that she always turned for explanation and sympathy. And to the wild Irish chieftain and scholar his gentle hostess and her daughter seemed something none the less "enskied and sainted" because they worked with their own hands, spinning, baking and brewing for the needs of their household. To Edburga he had told something of his story, of the fierce clan battle, when his father's castle crashed down in blood and flames; of himself, dragged, a terrified boy, from under a heap of dead, and of his mother lifted wailing from his father's body to pine and die herself a few weeks later. The child's nearest of kin had seized his inheritance and placed him in a monastery for safe keeping.

"Where," said Conan, "they had thought to have made a monk of me, but found there was nought of the priest about me save a trick of reading every book I could lay fingers on, and a way of wakening the whole house by singing every song I could come across."

"And these were no mean gifts," the lady Edburga said smiling.

"Alack, lady, they needed something more to turn them to account. Yet were the good fathers wondrous patient with me, my father having given fair lands and such gold as he could muster to their house in past days, and they forgave me, I might well

say seventy times seven times over, the graceless pranks I played on them. And though I ran away thrice, with a mind to make my way to Paris or Rome or what not, some strange drawing, I know not what, ever brought me back to them, very hungry and ragged, like the prodigal in the Gospel. For a while I fought under my kinsman's banner, but found the bread that he grudged me hard of eating, nor was he sorry to see my back, fearing lest I should claim mine own and find enough of my father's men yet faithful to the old race to back me. And then came the Danes and settled the whole matter for us, sacking castle and monastery in one day and night, and kindling a bonfire, by the light of which two of the poor brethren and I put our boat out under the very keels of their long ships and committed ourselves to Heaven and the waters. The poor brethren! Sorely enough did they wish they had stayed and risked the Danish axes when the wind came down upon us in mid-channel. I doubt whether they did not think the waves had been better over their heads than playing such revels beneath the boat. But to shore, by Heaven's mercy we came, and they found kindly tendance at Athelney among the good fathers at the king's monastery there, and I, being but a worthless wanderer by nature, drifted on hither."

"Nay, I think Heaven, as thou sayest, guided thy course, sir," said Edburga gently. "In the world God rules, no man drifts like a leaf on a stream."

"Mayhap not," was the answer; "yet my course has availed little to better the world, lady, I fear me."

"Our king will teach thee other things than that,

sir. His cry is ever for the scholars, who are to make the world wiser and therefore more strong."

"Yet the wisdom which Holy Writ priced far above rubies is to be found in no scholar's books, lady," was the answer; "and I have seen it for the first time under this roof, and thank you for the teaching."

And Edburga, who had never thought of comparing her own wise and gentle rule with that of the "virtuous woman" of the Book of Proverbs, would have said, had she known the word, that Conan had his countrymen's talent for "blarney." But indeed such women as Edburga and Eadgyth were a revelation to the wanderer. He had known little enough of women since his mother's death, certainly not of such women as these two. The stately, gentle lady of the house, quietly putting aside her own sorrow that her duties to those around her should not suffer, seemed to him like a reflection of that wise and kindly Abbess Hilda to whom scholars and warriors came for counsel, and whom "all who knew her called mother." And as for Eadgyth, so sunny and sweet and helpful, with her bright face and her ready hand and kindly thought for every one, Conan began to think that wandering over the world might be weary work after a time, and that a home, with such a wife as she would make to gladden it and to be cared for and protected in return, was a lot which many a man might envy. He was thinking of it one afternoon as he walked with Wilfrid through the bare woods a mile or so from Brockstede. They had been out on the track of a wolf, and were returning in the golden glory of level sun rays as the short February day closed in. Conan noticed, with a keen

delight, the warm, rich colour of the fallen beech leaves on which he trod, the soft blue of the distant hills, and the jubilant singing of a robin among the boughs. Wilfrid felt it too, but unconsciously; he never put his pleasure in the beauty of the place into words even to himself; he would never have dreamt of breaking into the snatches of song which rose to Conan's lips involuntarily. Indeed he eyed his companion curiously now and then, as he stepped along lightly, his head erect, with its dark elf locks thrown back from his brow, balancing the hunting spear he carried lightly in one hand and cutting off the heads of tall plants as if his overflowing energy must find some outlet. Wilfrid watched him and wondered, as he wondered in the evenings round the hearth, when Conan told stories which brought the thralls to listen open-mouthed and breathless, or sang until Ostritha hid her face and sobbed and even Eadgyth's clear eyes grew misty. It was not strange, he thought, that they should all think much of this brilliant and wonderful stranger, who could read books over which even Eadgyth, Wilfrid's paragon of learning, stumbled in vain, and made his harp speak until it charmed the very heart out of a man's breast. It was not in Wilfrid's nature to be jealous. Self-conceit had been killed in him once and for all by the terrible experience of his boyhood, and it is wonderful how a low opinion of ourselves takes the sting out of our feeling about other people's superiority. But he did wish sometimes that he, the thegn's freeman, knew something of the learning and the charm which belonged to this young chieftain from the land across the water.

"Faith!" exclaimed Conan at last, as if he could

keep his admiration no longer to himself, "this forest is, to my mind, a fairer temple than the stately church at Glastonbury, whereof my good brothers had so much to say. Where will you find nobler pillars than yonder line of beeches? And the moss we tread on puts your Roman tiles to shame, not to speak of the choir singing above us, and making us fear to come halting after their notes with our broken music. And, if we want more to hallow the place, yonder comes the fairest saint a man could choose to be his virgin patroness."

As he spoke, Eadgyth, with Ostritha by the hand, came up through the glade towards them.

"Well met, fair maids!" cried Conan, as he came within hearing; "whither away, seeing the sun is westering?"

"We are setting our faces homewards," said the girl; "but I am seeking for the hut of old Cuthred, the woodman. He and his old dame live hard by here, and their poverty keeps them unharmed, but the old woman comes ever for a dole of bread and broken meats, and I fear she is sick, since she came not yesterday. Where is the hut, Wilfrid? 'Tis so well hidden, I have missed it once and again."

Wilfrid knew the woods with a huntsman's careful, accurate knowledge, and very soon guided them to a poor hut thatched with rushes, and so much the colour of the fallen leaves and underwood as to be invisible from any distance. Eadgyth knocked at the wooden door, and after a few moments it was opened cautiously, and a bent old woman peeped out, blinking in the yellow sunset light.

"'Tis I, Frigyth, never fear," said Eadgyth

reassuringly. "I feared thou wast sick, since thou camest not for thy barley bread yesterday, so I have brought it with me."

"God reward thee, lady," said the cracked voice of the old dame. "Nay, 'tis not I that am sick, but I have one here nigh dying, lady, and I cannot leave him, and Cuthred is lame with the stiffness in his back, or he had come to beg the lady for a loaf for us all."

"Who is your guest?" asked Eadgyth.

"A poor stranger lad, lady, that crept in hither two days agone, and is like to die with none to mourn over him. See, lady, for thyself."

She opened the rickety door, and Eadgyth, bending her fair head, stepped into the little hovel. Wilfrid followed, with his instinct of watching over her, and as the sunset light streamed into the dark hut, and fell full upon the straw bed on the mud floor, Eadgyth gave a quick cry, and turned back to him.

"Wilfrid, look! my father!"

Wilfrid had started too at his first sight of the unconscious face on the low pillow, with the tangle of yellow curls shining in the sunlight like a fantastic aureole, but he recovered himself directly.

"It calls him back to us to see one sick as he was," he said gently. "This is a lad, Lady Eadgyth, but a little older than thyself. Poor boy, it goes ill with him, I fear."

"Nay, but look only at his face," said Eadgyth, still in a startled whisper; "see his lips and brow, Wilfrid, and the way his hair falls back, 'twas as if my father were lying there again."

And she hid her face with a sob as the recollection swept over her.

"Whence comes he?" Wilfrid asked of the woman.

"I know not, good sir, save that he crept here smitten with a burning fever, and has lain here ever since, moaning and raving so that it is pity to watch him, and now, I doubt, he is dying; and I would pray thee, if thou beest a good Christian, to speak a prayer by his side such as may speed his soul, for he is like to have little more to do with this world."

"Wherefore so?" said Conan's voice behind Wilfrid, "the lad is young, and may live yet, in spite of you."

He came forward, and knelt down by the wretched bed, looking closely at the sick man, and taking the nerveless hand softly in his own.

"He is not dying," he said, after a minute; "trust me, he will at least make a good fight for life. Hast some pillow to put under his head, mother?"

"Let me do it," said Eadgyth, quickly; "'tis like tending *him*," she added in a whisper.

The hut could produce nothing in the shape of a pillow, and Eadgyth hastily unfastened her own cloak, rolled it up and placed it under the lad's head. Conan meanwhile had drawn his dagger, and, with very rough hair dressing, had shorn away masses of fair matted locks. Then he proceeded to bleed his patient in the approved fashion of the time, bandaging his arm afterwards with a light, skilful touch which proved him to be no new hand at surgery. Finally, he took a small phial from the wallet he wore at his side, and, sending the old dame for water in a horn, mixed a draught carefully, and administered it.

"I picked up some odds and ends of leechcraft among the good brethren," he said to Eadgyth, "and such things may stead a man now and again, though 'tis more like to serve me in the dressing of a sword cut or an arrow wound. But if I know anything, this lad has many a fight before him yet."

He stood leaning against the shaky wall of the little cottage, looking down upon his patient with a doctor's keen, watchful interest. Eadgyth sat propping up the lad's head, as if the work were helping to heal the old wound. Ostritha had felt her way to her friend's side, and sat on the floor at her feet. Wilfrid was looking round the hut.

"What garments wore he?" he asked abruptly of the old woman. "Had he weapons or hunting gear?"

Frigyth produced a soiled tunic and leggings much stained and torn by weather and rough travelling, and a short-handled axe, which Wilfrid examined thoughtfully.

"Nought else? no sword or seax?" he asked.

"Nought, sir. He had very like dropped aught else he had. He had little wit left to hold to anything."

"'Tis a Danish axe," said Wilfrid to Conan.

"Ay, it is; wherefore not? You have Danes enough in this land settled as good fellow-countrymen. Yet 'tis not a Danish face."

"So it seems to me," said Wilfrid, thoughtfully; "the lady is right. 'Tis like the face of the good thegn that is gone, in more than in weakness and weariness."

"'Tis so like that it is joy to tend him," said Eadgyth; "and I would fain bide here and watch

him, if thou, Wilfrid, wilt guide Ostritha home, and bid my mother have no fears for me."

"Nay, I leave thee not here," said Wilfrid decidedly.

"Wherefore not? What ill should befall me? Or, if thou wilt, come back and guard us all; only let me stay."

"I will bide here," said Conan; "the leech will not leave his patient till he be cured, for his own credit's sake."

"Ay, do so," said Eadgyth readily; "and I, too, will bide, and Wilfrid shall haste home with Ostritha and fetch us dry fuel, and linen, and aught that my mother will send; and I will make some broth, and do what else I can."

Wilfrid looked from her to Conan, and nodded assent in his quiet way. Eadgyth was clearly set upon her charitable work, and it was true enough that no harm could well come to her with himself and Conan in charge. He could guard her, at any rate, and run her errands, even if he had no wondrous medical skill and draughts like magic potions to cure diseases and win her admiration, as the Irishman could do. Eadgyth kissed Ostritha, and whispered to her to go home with Wilfrid and take her place in the hall to-night. Then, as the two went out together, she set herself to straighten the bed coverlet, and to make her rolled-up cloak into a better pillow, and, laying her patient gently down upon it, she rose and set to work to make the wretched room a little more comfortable. The girl was in her element, for she was a born nurse and an excellent housewife, and Conan watched her with delighted eyes as she moved about, stopping to cheer and comfort the

old folks, stirring the red embers of the fire into a blaze, and borrowing Conan's own cloak to screen the door, as the evening wind blew chill and cold through the wide cracks between the shaky boards, and a drenching storm of rain and hail came sweeping through the bare trees.

Wilfrid was back in less time than could have been believed possible, followed by a serf, who helped him to carry such cheer as the "good King Wenceslas" bore to the peasant's hut—"flesh, and wine, and pine logs," the wine being indeed some of a precious store kept for sickness or for high festivals, since home-brewed ale and mead were the ordinary drink of the Saxon household. The lady Edburga, he said, was well pleased that her daughter should aid old Frigyth to care for the sick stranger, and she had sent a phial of some wondrous cordial, which she herself had distilled from herbs and found useful in fevers. Indeed, Wilfrid said, she was well disposed to have come herself to lend what help she could, but that guests had arrived at Brockstede, and she must play the hostess at the supper board.

"What guests, then?" asked Eadgyth, looking up from the bundle she was unfastening.

"A hunting party from the house of Sexwulf, seeking shelter from the storm,—one Sweyne, a Dane of East Anglia, one of Guthrum's jarls, who gave submission to Alfred at the Frith of Wedmore. He holds fair lands, so one of his men told me,—a better bargain than ploughing the barren seas with hard blows for harvest on shore. He vowed it was a good day when the Vikings signed peace with the King of Wessex."

"Wherefore bides he with Sexwulf?"

Wilfrid shrugged his shoulders. "Sexwulf has comrades of many sorts and nations, lady."

"The wiser he," said Eadgyth, smiling up at him.

She knew something of Wilfrid's distrust of the Thegn of Hartington, but suspicion was so foreign to her nature that she set down part of it to his jealous care for her own family.

"East Anglia has given pledges to the king," she said, "and the king's subjects must show their trust in his allies. Well, these great guests must feast without me to-night, and Frigyth and I will keep festival here with all my mother has sent."

And she set to work, with the help of the old dame, to prepare such a supper as the poor folks had seldom tasted. Conan watched her as she moved to and fro from the hearth to the bedside, the ruddy wood flame dancing on the fair face and shining hair, while the old peasant stared open-mouthed from his corner, as if some legend had come true and an angel had descended from Heaven itself to work in human form among poor folks for the love of God and mankind.

Wilfrid and his follower took up their posts outside the cottage, inside which the mighty young warrior could not stand erect. The storm had ceased, and he was far too good a soldier and huntsman to mind a February night under the open sky, and was prepared to rest quite as well on a heap of bracken with his cloak about him as on his straw bed at Brockstede.

The darkness had closed in by this time. The two old folks, drowsy in the unaccustomed warmth and comfort, nodded by the fire. Outside, the wind howled among the trees, rising to a fierce roar now

THE WOUNDED STRANGER IN CUTHRED'S HUT. p. 103

and again as it crashed the branches to and fro, and then dying away in a long eerie wail.

"One could fancy 'twas some poor soul in pain or grief," Eadgyth said to Conan.

"At home we should say 'twas unhallowed spirits of the woods," he answered.

"Ay, that may be so," she answered gravely; "our folks, too, have strange tales of them."

"Yet thou fearest them not, lady?"

"Nay, wherefore should I? I trow they'll do me no ill so I be about good work. Did we not read in Father Wulfstan's book how the evil things on the Farne Island fled before holy Cuthbert's prayers? I am going to say mine, and then shall we be safe from all ill, whether of flesh or spirit."

She knelt and said her prayers aloud, simply like a little child, ending with the "Breast-plate of St. Patrick," which Conan himself had taught her.

"Christ under me,
Christ above me,
Christ on my right,
Christ on my left."

The old people roused to say "Amen" as she rose; and she turned to find another pair of eyes fixed upon her. The sick lad lay with his face turned towards her, gazing with a puzzled, wondering look in his eyes, wide and deep blue as her own. Eadgyth was by his side at once, asking gently how he did; but he did not speak, only lay watching her with the same puzzled look. Conan came and looked at him, feeling pulse and skin, and nodding with evident satisfaction.

"He will do well enough, I fancy," he whispered to Eadgyth; and he went to fill a cup with the milk Wilfrid had brought.

Eadgyth, as she gently straightened the coverlet and loosened the rather tattered linen shirt her patient wore, noticed something fastened round his neck and gleaming in the firelight. She bent to look closer, and saw that it was a gold ornament, a cross of beautiful workmanship, upon which the Saxons prided themselves. As she was examining it, the lad's eyes opened again, and, with a sudden movement he closed his hand over the jewel, as if to protect it. Eadgyth smiled at him reassuringly.

"Fear not," she said, "none shall take it from thee."

Her patient seemed satisfied, and swallowed readily the milk that Conan brought; but, even while he lay back apparently asleep, his fingers still clasped the cross on his breast, as if to be satisfied of its safety.

"'Tis a precious jewel, doubtless," Eadgyth said, "'tis well he fell into honest hands."

"'Tis well indeed for him," said Conan. "I would fain see what it is, but he guards it too carefully to spy at it without rousing him."

"He will let us see it anon, when he knows we have no will to take it. Mayhap one might learn his name from it. Perchance his mother fastened the holy sign about his neck. At least he comes of Christian folk."

So the night passed. The old woman came once and again to Eadgyth's side, urging her to sleep and let her take her place; but the girl sent her back to the fireside, vowing she was not at all weary, and would rather stay. It was true that the face of the

young stranger stirred in her sudden thrills of recollection, half painful, and yet wonderfully sweet. To do for him what she had done for her father, but to watch instead the gradual falling into sound, healthful sleep, brought strange comfort to her. She kept wishing in her simple way that her mother could have shared her watch. And when the wind rose and the weird soughing and wailing sounded among the boughs, she would fold her hands, and say St. Patrick's prayer again, feeling the strong, calm sense of the Everlasting Arms about her. Once she sang softly the loved words of the "Dream of the Holy Rood," as she had been used to do by her father's bedside; and again she found her patient's eyes fixed upon her, with the same puzzled gaze, as if trying to unravel the mystery of his surroundings, until at last, as the grey autumn dawn crept in through the many chinks and crannies of the rickety walls, it showed him lying in sound restful sleep, the breath coming regularly, between his lips, and the fingers, though they had relaxed their hold, still clasped over the shining cross.

"No fear now," Conan said, laughing under his breath; "the lad will give the world plenty of trouble for many a fair year to come, unless sword or axe cut short his fighting days early. Lady Eadgyth, thou hadst best be away to Brockstede and rest thyself. He will sleep now like a log till the sun be high and maybe low again, and wake as boys do, half well, and hungry as a wolf. Thou hast charmed or prayed him back to the world, and mayest leave us poor folks to keep him there."

"Nay, now, 'tis thy charms, not mine, have done it,"

whispered Eadgyth gaily back ; "and thou hast need be as weary as I am, and, if I be going, we shall all break our fast first."

And she set to work to help old Frigyth, moving about with light step and joyous face, in triumph over the life she had helped to save. Conan intended to watch by his patient for the day, promising to come for anything he wanted, though, as he declared confidently, the lad would want nothing to-day but sleep, which would do the work quicker than any drugs. And Eadgyth, freeing herself from the adoring old peasants, went out with Wilfrid into the morning sunlight, turning back now and again to wave to them as she stepped lightly along the wood path towards home.

CHAPTER VII

The Danish Earl

"The heart he asks is fixed on Heaven."

Scott.

AND meanwhile, while Wilfrid was so jealously guarding the threshold of the hut where one of his young charges was busy with her work of mercy, her young brother was perhaps needing his care and vigilance even more. It was a stately train who had come spurring through the storm of rain to the hospitable gates of Brockstede on the February evening. Sweyne, the Danish Earl, rode with a fine following, and was himself a sturdy personable man, with wit enough to have learnt a good deal of culture from the nation in which he had settled. When the Danes acquired land in any country, they made it their home, and the settlers of that time had left their native land because it no longer offered them living-room or provision, and were prepared to carve their fortunes afresh. Whether they would ever be loyal subjects or allies of the king who had conquered them was yet to be seen, but

meanwhile they were getting the most they could out of the land allotted to them, and, in many cases, intermarrying with their Saxon neighbours, even if they might be suspected of treasonable correspondence with the long-ships of their kith and kin, when they hovered about the channel or swept across the North Sea. But at all events Jarl Sweyne was a pleasant and gracious guest enough, and very ready in his praises of the hospitable houses of East Saxony and in his appreciation of the home-brewed ale. Alfgar, especially, thought the visitor excellent company. For the first time the boy was taking his father's place as host, for, though he sat every evening in the great carved chair where his slim figure looked very slight and boyish, the household, who had known him from his babyhood, could hardly pay him more than nominal deference as their future lord. Nor had he himself ever thought of desiring it. He had shrunk, in his first grief, from taking the familiar seat, and much preferred talking over hunting and hawking expeditions with the lads of his own age to giving his attention to Wilfrid's conversation with his mother as to the farm work, the brewing of beer, and the salting of meat. Father Wulfstan, Conan, and Ostritha had been so far their only guests, and Alfgar stood too much in awe of the good Father, and was too well aware that he would have to answer for his shortcomings in his lessons, to talk very freely in his presence. But to-night, with Wilfrid absent, he suddenly awoke to the fact that there was some pleasure in entertaining so fine a company as this in his own hall, as he had many a time seen his father do. And Sweyne, moreover, though he was so fine a

warrior, seemed to think his young host well worth his notice, and asked questions about the hunting in the forest, the fishing in the river, and the weapons hung upon the walls, which Alfgar was ready enough to answer.

The lady Edburga, as was the custom of the Saxon women, retired early from the hall to her own chamber; but, though the tables were removed, the drinking-cup still went round, and Alfgar, who on other occasions had often found the music and games in his mother's room more amusing than the talk of his father's friends, stayed now as host among his guests. Free health-drinking is apt to loosen tongues, and, as the evening went on, the Danish Earl grew more and more friendly and talkative. He praised his young host unsparingly, vowing he had fought against his father and would be proud to draw his sword side by side with his son, and that Thegn Alfgar needed but the chance to be a stouter soldier than Thegn Bernulf of noble memory.

"How old art thou, lad?" he cried. "Fourteen at Shrovetide, sayest thou? Why, I trow I was no more when I took my first cruise and gave the good brethren of Crowland a blaze to cook their fish by. Ah, thy pardon, my fair host! that is all past and to be forgotten; we have done with our wild Viking days and repented of our lawless deeds, though, in good sooth, they gave our youth a chance of seeing shrewd blows passed, and of learning the use of sword and axe instead of children's toys."

"None the less chance have we in this land," said Alfgar, bristling in indignant defence of his country. "My father had not told sixteen years when he

charged up the hill of Ashdown after the King Alfred—the Atheling, as he was in those days; ay, and drove the pagans before him, as I have heard many a one say. And that was but the first time they showed him their backs, seeing he was by the king's side at Ethandune and at Rochester, and taught them——"

And here the young host broke off abruptly, with the recollection that the occasions he spoke of could hardly be a pleasant remembrance to his guest. But Sweyne only laughed good-humouredly as he emptied his flagon, and held it out to be replenished.

"Never fear, never fear, my fair host; we be all brothers now, and can shake hands over past differences. If I measured swords with thy father in the past, I drink the more gladly with his noble son in the present. Thy health, my bold young thegn, and may we draw swords side by side ere the world be much older! Under what banner are we to see thee winning thy name?"

"Under the dragon of Wessex," answered the lad proudly. "A king's thegn was my father, and 'tis for King Alfred alone I fight, the best leader ever a man drew sword for."

"Thou sayest sooth, my friend; and one, moreover, who knows how to set store by his gallant followers."

"My mother tells me 'tis an ungodly thing to long for the pagan army among us once more," said Alfgar confidentially; "and yet I am fain to wish it in my heart, seeing 'twould give me the chance my father had, and show them all that there is better work for me than spelling out yonder crabbed letters and crooking my fingers over a pen instead of a sword."

"Women are made faint-hearted," said the Dane laughing, "and like well enough to see son and husband safe within doors out of the clash of arms."

"Not so my mother," said Alfgar with sudden self-reproach. "My father ever said she was the stouter-hearted of the two, and sent him into the battle with a right good will when he came nigh to giving up hope of saving the land."

"No doubt of that," said the Danish earl readily. "We need no telling, my young sir, that thou comest not of cravens on either side of the house. Yet what joy can the women folk find in warfare save for welcoming the victors? And such joy as that wilt thou give to thy lady mother before another year be over thy head."

"Alack," sighed Alfgar, "they are all for sending me to school with the king's sons, as if this weary book-learning were the one thing worth working for."

"Out upon it!" cried the Dane, emptying his tankard afresh. "Work for priests, if you will: not for young warriors. I am a good enough man of my hands, but I never used them to sign my name, no, nor ever needed it. By the hammer of Thor, I would see every book in the land burning ere I'd spend an hour in learning to read one of them."

"Our king holds otherwise," said Alfgar, rather shocked by the heathen oath.

"Doubtless, doubtless! the king is clerk as well as warrior, but a nation of clerks will never keep his crown on his head. The king is a wise man, and knows the worth of the arms that strike for him. He will never have thy father's son waste his fairest years with his nose fastened to a book."

"Yet he bade me to his own school along with the Atheling Ethelwerd," sighed Alfgar; "and Wilfrid and my mother are for sending me thither."

The Dane drew the heavy chair in which he sat nearer to the hearth, and held out his hands to the blaze. It was growing late, for the drinking, as was too often the case in Saxon houses, had been long and deep. More than one of Sweyne's followers lay already in heavy sleep, stretched out on the rushes which strewed the floor; the rest were still pledging the Brockstede men, and telling old war tales one against the other, tales which grew more and more remarkable with each horn of ale. The late thegn had spent too much time in the company of his refined and abstemious king to drink as most of his countrymen did, though the vice was unfortunately too common to be thought much of. Wilfrid never cared for such a revel, it seemed out of keeping with the life of constant watchfulness which had become habitual to him. Had he been in the hall that night young Alfgar had never sat *tête-à-tête* with his guest among the sleeping or merry-making party, who seemed to hear or mark little of what went on. The Danes had the reputation for drinking even more deeply than their Saxon neighbours while yet keeping their wits about them, and Sweyne, though boisterous in his talk and laughter, was very well aware what he was speaking of and with whom he had to do. Alfgar had drunk too, in compliment to his guest, more than he was accustomed to. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes bright; he looked more than usually handsome as he leaned forwards, with the firelight glowing on his fair face and hair.

"And who is he that should guide thy father's son?" asked the Dane, warmly. "Some nearest of kin, who rules all things until thou be come to years?"

"Nay, I have no near kindred," said the boy. "My father bade Wilfrid have a care of all, and aid my mother."

"What, the young house-carle with the solemn face, thy father's man? A useful knave no doubt, and a sturdy, but one to take his bidding from the head of thy house, not keep his master in leading strings."

"Wilfrid is free born," said Alfgar, a little ashamed; "and fought ever by my father's side."

"And is not ill pleased to take thy father's place. Look not so black at me, young sir. Men are but men, and 'tis not every day that a churl has the good fortune to play the noble for a few years. Little wonder that he finds letters a fitting pastime for his master's son."

"I wot well Wilfrid loves us all," said Alfgar, still rather startled; "my mother trusts him wholly."

"Women, ay, even the wisest of them, are apt to fasten their faith to any man who vows to guard them. Nay, young sir, the lady may be as wise as the Valas, but a woman she is, and it behoves the men of her family to see that her trust be not misplaced. 'Tis in the hands of her son, not of her lord's man, that she should be bestowed."

Alfgar looked thoughtfully into the fire.

"Wilfrid was scarce older than I when he watched over my mother while my father followed the king to sea," he said. "I have heard her tell as much."

"Ay, my friend, and thou wilt teach her that it is not thy man alone who is fit to use sword in her

defence rather than spell letters at the feet of a clerk. Fear not, mothers are ever late to learn that their children are babes no longer."

"King Alfred knew better," said Alfgar, with his head high: "he chid Sexwulf, who would have jeered at me for offering him my service in my father's place."

"The king is a wise man, but all have not his wisdom, my young thegn. It is for thee to give Sexwulf back his jest in his throat."

"'Tis my father's lands he craves for," said Alfgar fiercely; "'tis for that that he would win the king to set me aside as a babe."

"Then must thou teach him better. Small wonder if he thought to work with the king while he hears that Bernulf's son is led by his mother and his father's house-carle."

Alfgar's cheeks burned.

"Does he hear that?" he added hotly. "He shall learn another tale. Bernulf's son is led by no man living."

"I believe thee, my thegn; and thou wilt make Sexwulf own as much."

"Methought Sexwulf was thy friend?" said Alfgar, with a shade of doubt in his voice.

The Dane laughed carelessly.

"We are good comrades, no more. I know some of his desires. He is free of his tongue when healths go round. And I know, moreover, that he feared thy father, having doubtless good cause."

"He shall have the same cause to fear his son," said Alfgar, thrusting the blazing logs with his foot, until a shower of sparks flew upwards.

"I trow he shall," said the Dane, lifting his cup to his lips. "I drink success to the good resolve, Thegn Alfgar."

Alfgar muttered the answer to the pledge rather uncertainly. He was flushed and excited, and his head was swimming. He had a vague idea of his own power and importance, a consciousness of being able and ready to fight any one, whether Sexwulf and his followers or the whole pagan army, and he had an indignant sense that Wilfrid was holding him back from mighty deeds.

But the whole was a confused jumble in his brain, and he fell asleep at last in his chair, from whence one of his own serfs carried him to bed, after the too frequent custom of those days.

Alfgar woke next morning with the headache he deserved, and a disposition to quarrel with every one. But it was quite impossible to be angry with his guest, for the Dane, to whom a carouse more or less made no difference at all, was in the best of humours, and especially complimentary to his young host. The lady Edburga watched her son rather anxiously as he conducted the guest round the homestead, exhibiting stables and barns, plough and pasture land, and bidding his neighbour to hunt with him when he chose. It was not only the white cheeks and heavy eyes, the legacy of last night's revel, which made the boy unlike himself. There was a rough self-assertion about his manner this morning, as different as possible from his usual frank courtesy. It was as if he were not sure of his own position, and meant to mark his sense of it to himself and other people. She heard him rating the swineherd in tones she had

never heard from him before, and suspected that it was to impress the Danish earl who stood beside him. Ostritha, with the keen sensitiveness of the blind to changes of tone and voice, noticed it instantly, as she stood by the window of the hall.

"Alfgar is ill at ease this morning," she said to the lady: "he speaks as my father speaks when the serfs cross him, and then there is the sound of the whip and crying out. I have heard no voice like that since I came here. The serfs here obey without whipping."

"Alfgar will learn by-and-by that it is not thus men learn obedience," said the lady quietly; but her eyes followed her son and his companion with a new anxiety, and she wished that either Wilfrid would return or the guest hurry his departure.

But it was not Wilfrid who was first to arrive at Brockstede that morning. Even as Edburga turned from the window, Ostritha exclaimed—

"There are more horsemen coming."

And after a minute the sound of the regular hoof-beats on the road, which her quick ears had been the first to detect, became clearly audible.

"They are coming hither," Ostritha went on. "Who might it be, lady?"

And then, as steps and voices sounded at the gate, her face paled suddenly, and she caught at the lady's hand.

"What ails thee, my child?" asked Edburga kindly. "They are no foes."

"'Tis my father; I heard his voice," faltered the girl. "Oh, lady, he wants me not."

"Then will we pray him to let thee bide here, where thou art so welcome," said Edburga, with her arm

round the girl's waist. "Fear not, my little one; mayhap thou art mistaken, and thy father finds his home all too lonely without thee, and comes to seek thee. At least lift up thy head, and greet him fairly, as a daughter should do."

And holding Ostritha's cold, shaking fingers in her own warm clasp, the lady stepped out to the gateway to give gracious and dignified greeting to the very unwelcome guest. The thegn himself, who was just alighting, was, however, courteous enough to satisfy any one who had not heard more of his feelings towards his only child. He craved pardon of the noble lady of Brockstede for his long delay in thanking her for her goodness. The case of a contumacious franklin, who had refused to submit to his authority as sheriff, had kept him at home. He was bound in honour to the good king and the peace of the country to see that the laws were administered, and he was unwilling that any but himself in person should thank the lady for the safety of his child and for the hospitality she had found at Brockstede.

"That, sir, has been our pleasure," said Edburga gravely; "the maiden has been a dear and welcome companion to my daughter and myself, and will be sorely missed if it be your pleasure for her to return with you."

She led Ostritha gently forward, giving a reassuring pressure to the girl's hand, as she felt how it was trembling.

"Fairer company no maiden could desire," said Sexwulf, while his daughter shrank involuntarily from his kiss upon her brow. "My home, gracious lady, is more a soldier's camp than a maiden's bower."

"If it be your will, sir, your daughter is welcome among us as dear guest and comrade for my own child as long as it pleases you," said Edburga readily. "'Tis ill for a maid to be alone, and we should be blithe indeed to keep her here."

Sexwulf was in the hall by this time, accepting the cup of welcome, filled by the chief among the house servants, and handed to him, as was customary, by the lady of the house herself.

He did not answer until the formality of health-drinking had been gone through, and then turned with a smile to the door, at which Alfgar was entering with the Danish earl.

"I stand indebted to you, lady, for your courteous offer," he said, "which I had accepted gladly, since I wot well that my daughter would profit by the teaching she would receive. But there is another whose mind on the matter must be inquired; and his will, methinks, will be that she ride back with us to Hartington, there to make ready for leaving her home as a bride."

"How, sir?" asked Edburga in surprise, while Ostritha caught her breath with a gasp of dismay. "This is surely a new thought, and unknown to the maiden whom it most concerns!"

"Truly, lady," returned the thegn calmly. "I had not spoken to her of the honour I purposed for her, fearing to turn the light head of so young a maid with the high estate she is to fill, but it is none the less true that my good comrade, Earl Sweyne, has made offer for her hand."

The lady's arm, passing swiftly about Ostritha's waist, saved the girl from falling as she staggered

back against her. The Dane came forward as if to take her hand.

"If I spoke not of it yester even," he said, "'twas that I was fain to receive so rich a gift from the hands of the rightful owner. Will my bride not suffer my salute?"

"The maiden is shamefaced and surprised, sir," said the lady Edburga, as Ostritha only shrank away and hid her face against her friend's shoulder; "such news is all too suddenly told, and may well bewilder any maiden."

"No, no," cried the blind girl, raising her face suddenly, and with the pathetic gesture of her hands which said so much, "'tis not that; but I cannot wed, father. I cannot wed. I would give up the world. That is my will. Oh, I pray you baulk me not."

She stretched out her hands, as if with a piteous attempt to persuade him by the touch which had to serve her instead of sight, but Sexwulf moved a little so as to avoid her grasp.

"I marvel not," he said in his even tones, "that in so holy and well-ordered a household a maiden's thoughts should turn towards the renouncing of the world. Yet shall I be well content if my daughter attains but to so much sanctity as the lady here has achieved outside the cloister."

"I will not," cried Ostritha, with a sudden flash of passion, "I cannot be a grand lady—ye know it well, both of ye. I am a poor helpless blind maid, and ye despise me in your hearts. I will not wed. I will hide me where none shall flout me and wish me away,—I will put myself in sanctuary where you

cannot reach me. I will pray the king to let me have my will."

"Yet will the king not find sanctuary for every hot-headed maiden that runs from her father's will," replied Sexwulf. "Thou hast been a babe too long, Ostritha mine, and hast not learnt the honour done thee."

"And wherefore am I a baby?" cried the girl, as if the dread of her fate had overpowered all other fear. "What have you ever taught me to fit me to rule a great house? You had let me grow up no better than one of the pagans who cry to Thor and Woden."

"Thy future lord is content to wait for thy learning, my daughter," was the unmoved answer; "and, if he complains not, there is no need for thee to hang back."

"And I were well content to leave house and home to go its way with so fair a face beside me," said the Dane.

"Therefore busk thee, daughter, with thy best speed," said Sexwulf rising; "for we must be on our way, and have delayed already too long."

"Pardon me, sir," said Edburga, to whom the girl clung as if for protection, "but do you purpose to take the maiden among your followers as if she were but one of them, and with no woman to accompany her?"

"Her waiting women are without, most noble lady, and bide but your call to array their mistress for her journey."

"That will I do," said Edburga gravely; "the maiden has been as my dear child, and it is with grief that I let her go, praying those who have the right

to care for her to prove worthy of that trust. Come, my Ostritha."

And with her arm thrown tenderly about the trembling, sobbing girl, she drew her out of the hall. In the lady's own chamber Ostritha flung herself on her knees at Edburga's feet, hiding her face in her friend's lap.

"Oh, lady, lady," she sobbed, "save me! Let them not take me."

"My poor child, my poor little one," said Edburga tenderly, "I have no power to keep thee from thy father."

"Ah, sweet lady, he does not want me for his child. Would not the good priest aid me, Father Wulfstan, who was so kind and tender to me? I will tell him I would give up my life to the service of Heaven, and he will tell them it were an evil deed to make me wed."

"Nay, my little one; God's blessing rests, too, on holy wedded love. Thou mayest serve Heaven well as a worthy and honoured wife."

"But that I shall not be," said the girl, raising her tear-stained face from Edburga's lap. "Would the earl seek me, a poor blind girl, who knows nought and can bring him no honour? 'Tis never for love of me that he chooses to wed me. Belike he has bought me of my father to bind some promise they have made each other. It were better I were sold for a slave, as some men have sold their children. Oh, I would I were, so I might be slave to thee, lady, and serve thee."

"My child," said Edburga fondly, "I would keep thee here right gladly as my well-loved daughter, but

such may not be. It may be God's will that thou win thy lord's love by gentleness and patience, and bring him to honour and esteem thee. Or, indeed, it may be His will that thou serve Him in much tribulation; but He will not leave thee, my child, for wherever He sends His children He goes Himself with them. Remember the prayer of the holy Patrick which our guest spake in the hall; Christ will be above thee and beneath thee, on thy right hand and on thy left."

She clasped the girl close, as she knelt beside her sobbing still, but more quietly. Then, after a minute's silence, she went on—

"Now, my little one, bear that in thy mind and look up, and I will cloak thee for thy journey lest we anger thy father by delay. And thou must do thy best to be a wise and dutiful daughter, for so mayest thou win him to care for thee and hear thee, and mayhap change his mind in this matter."

Ostritha stood up obediently and let the lady smooth her tumbled hair and arrange her hood over it. Before she was ready a knock came at the door, followed at once by the entrance of a buxom waiting-maid, not at all diffident at having walked into the lady's bower unbidden.

"So please you, lady," she said, "my lord asks for my young mistress, having no further time to linger."

"Thy mistress will not delay him," said Edburga quietly, fastening Ostritha's cloak about her; but Elgiva was not to be repressed.

"Faith! my young lady," she said; "methinks thou lookest the fresher and the fairer for thy bath in the

river that we hear tell of, save for the tears which are ill greeting for a bridegroom. But we shall soon have done with them when we come to busk thee for thy wedding. Did I not tell thee the thegn would make thee a merry bride ere long?"

"Thou wilt do well to care better for thy mistress and talk of it less," said Edburga, longing to administer a sharper rebuke and yet fearful of alienating one of Ostritha's few friends.

"Fear not, lady," was the ready answer. "I look to serve the wife of Earl Sweyne, and I will see she becomes her high station. But the thegn calls and the bridegroom grows impatient."

Edburga did not answer, but, taking the girl's hand in hers, led her quietly out of the room. At the hall door there was the bustle of a start. The followers of Sexwulf and Sweyne were already mounted, and the thegn and his friend stood waiting with evident impatience.

"Here is the fair lady at last," said the Dane, as Ostritha, with her hood pulled low over her drooping face, came out guided by her friend.

"Her dallying speaks much for the hospitality she is so loath to leave," said Sexwulf, with one of the attempts at courtesy which sat badly upon him.

"I am as loath to lose her, sir," said Edburga gravely; "and should your mind so change as to send her once more to us she will be ever welcome."

She stood by while the girl was lifted to her horse behind one of the thegn's followers, and put her arms about her as Ostritha leaned down for a last embrace.

"Commend me to Eadgyth," faltered the girl in her ear.

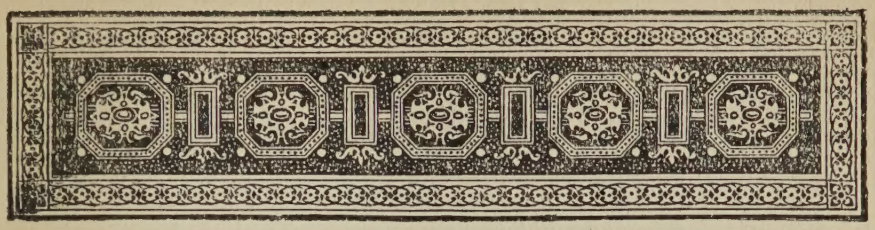
"I will, my child. Thou wilt be ever in her prayers and in my own. May God bless and keep thee!"

Alfgar meanwhile was exchanging parting words with the Danish earl.

"Fare thee well, my young thegn," said Sweyne; "I doubt not to hear great news of thee ere long, that thou art walking in thy father's ways without leading by house-carle or clerk. Perchance we may draw sword side by side ere we be many months older."

"I ask no better," said Alfgar readily.

"Nor I a better comrade," laughed the Dane, as he sprang into his saddle and followed the departing horsemen.



CHAPTER VIII

The Old Foe

"Thy father's deeds are told,
In the bower and in the hold.
Foes are on thy native sea,
Give our bards a tale of thee."

MRS. HEMANS.

SCARCELY had the last gleam of Sexwulf's spears vanished over the hill, and Edburga had just turned with a sigh to her household duties, when light feet came flying over the threshold and Eadgyth hurried in, the eagerness to tell her own story eclipsed for the moment by dismay at the news of Ostritha's departure.

"If I had but bidden her farewell," she cried. "Oh, I know how sorely she grieved to go. And is it true, indeed, what they are saying that her father will wed her to a Dane who is yet half a pagan? Oh, what an evil thing! and she, who longed to serve Heaven only. Mother, mother, can we do nought?"

"We may not take a maiden from her father,

Eadgyth. My hope is that his mind may yet change or the Dane may find another bride. And how does thy patient, child? Comes Wilfrid with thee?"

"He does well, mother, so says Conan, who is a very wondrous leech, and bides to-day to tend him. And Wilfrid is here, and, moreover, a messenger from Father Wulfstan, whom we fell in with on our way."

Wilfrid and the messenger were indeed just behind her, but even the interest of the message was overpowered to Eadgyth by her distress for her friend, and she left her mother to hear the news, while she ran out to seek sympathy from Alfgar. But Alfgar was unusually unsympathetic, and was indeed disposed to be decidedly cross. He vowed there was too much talk made about Sexwulf's cruelty to his daughter. Wherefore should she be so loath to wed the Danish earl? All maidens looked to wed some day, he supposed.

"But, Alfgar, they vow he is half a heathen!" said his sister, reproachfully, "and that he swears by Thor and Odin, and did but bathe in the blessed font to win lands in our country, and that he might well rise against the king, now that the pagan ships are come again to East Anglia."

"Men say many things with no truth in them," said Alfgar, shortly, "and maids ever believe the first tale they hear."

"Nay, now, Alfgar, I do but credit those I know speak truth. Wilfrid ever says the oaths of East Anglia are like to weigh light enough, if their kindred win an advantage over us."

"Wilfrid is not the only man in England with any wit, though thou seemest to know no other," said Alfgar, sharply.

"Why, Alfgar, 'twas my father's mind too, and, Conan, who is wise enough, as thou must own, said to Father Wulfstan that he feared East Anglia would ever be a thorn in the side of our king, for once the pagans call them to plunder, they are like to remember that they themselves are no English folk."

"Nor does Conan the Scot himself come of English folk," retorted Alfgar; "and when we come to ask what strangers are doing on our shores we may begin with him."

"Sure thou art sick this morning," said Eadgyth, in puzzled surprise, for her brother had never spoken so roughly to her before, "or something is amiss, that I anger thee like this. Thou wouldest not have me wed a Dane that was half a pagan, and might be again the king's foe; and I have taken Ostritha for my dear sister, and what can I do save weep and pray for her? Let us go see what message Father Wulfstan has sent to mother."

She turned as she spoke, and went back into the hall, Alfgar following slowly. A suspicion that the business might concern himself was in his mind, and he was ready to resent, as he had never done before, that his mother was taking counsel with Wilfrid, before calling him to hear the father's message.

Eadgyth might well say that he was not himself this morning. He had been occasionally wilful and headstrong before now, but last night's talk had sown in

his frank, careless nature new seeds of jealousy and suspicion which might spring into vigorous life and bear bitter fruit before all was done. The lady Edburga was in her own chamber behind the hall, where she sat, talking earnestly, as Alfgar had expected, with Wilfrid, who stood beside her. She looked up as her son and daughter entered, and held out her hand.

"My Alfgar," she said, "I was but just about to send for thee. Here is news that concerns thee chiefly. Our good friend, Father Wulfstan, sends us word that certain scholars and teachers, coming to the king's court from Gaul, rest now in London, and will pass by us, when thou mayest well join them and travel in their company."

Alfgar's cloudy brow grew darker than ever.

"Wherefore should I make one of their train, my mother?" he asked, in anything but complaisant tones.

"Because, my son, we may not spare men enough to companion thee. Father Wulfstan tells us also that the pagans have been plundering from their camp on the Thames, and that it is the king's pleasure that we of the border land watch East Anglia well, and be ready in case he has need of us."

"Then it would be my father's will that I should take his place here and hold this land for the king," said the boy eagerly.

"So shalt thou, my son, later on. And, to fit thee for such service, would he have thee get such learning as our king puts within the reach of his followers' sons."

"A man may fight for king and country without the knowledge of letters," said Alfgar.

"Yea, my son, as yonder fierce pagans fight; but he will serve king and country the better for knowing the wisdom of great men of old."

"My father had little such," persisted Alfgar.

"Thy father's youth was passed in evil days, when the light of learning was well-nigh quenched in our land, and bitterly did he himself rue it, and long, as King Alfred does, for such quietness as might give him the leisure to learn. He was ever thankful that Wilfrid was at hand to read and write for him such things as were needful."

Alfgar's brow grew blacker at the sound of the name, and he turned with a swift flash of defiance, but Wilfrid was there no longer. He had gone out of the room silently, as if to leave mother and son to each other. The boy stood a moment with downcast eyes.

"Thou art ready to send me hence, my mother," he said bitterly, at last.

"My Alfgar"—and Edburga rose and came nearer to him, laying her gentle hands on his shoulders, "I would send thee into battle and peril of death if the time were come for it; how much more into the keeping of wise and worthy men, that thou thyself mayest bear worthily thy father's name."

"My father was scarce older than I when he fought at Ashdown," urged Alfgar again.

"Ay, my son, but he has said a thousand times that he would not have thy youth like his and thy time for learning cut short by the need to bear arms. It is the king's will for thee, and his also."

"And Wilfrid's, I trow," was on Alfgar's lips, but he did not speak it, only stared gloomily at the floor and made no sign in response to his mother's kiss upon his brow. He did not openly refuse obedience, for parental authority was highly esteemed in his age and nation; but Sweyne's words rankled in his heart as he turned away, "Led by his mother and his housecarle." Small wonder indeed if Sexwulf despised his youth and powerlessness. Edburga noticed the change in him and guessed something of the cause, with a mother's quick intuition. Wisely, too, she refrained from saying more to him, trusting that the boy's real, true, loving heart would assert itself again when last night's revel and talk were forgotten. Yet she felt bitterly that the head of their household had gone just when his son needed him most.

"A woman is but a poor guide for a growing lad," she sighed to herself, and then she smiled again hopefully, as was her wont. "The king has vowed to be father to him; and what better could one desire? With him for model and for teacher he cannot but do well."

And then she summoned Eadgyth to help her in the work familiar to mothers still, when the boys leave for school, of looking over her son's wardrobe. Alfgar's attire was chiefly home-made, wool from their own sheep, spun and dyed and stitched on the place; but his mother brought out, too, and laid aside tenderly for him, arms and ornaments of his father's, the mantle which the thegn wore over the short tunic, worn alike by all ranks, the dagger with its jewelled handle, and a heavy brooch and bracelets which were family heirlooms and must pass to the only son of the house.

Alfgar's resentment might have vanished had he seen the loving care with which those treasured possessions were taken from their chest for him. But he was in no mood for home that day, and had called his dogs and two of the serfs and gone off into the forest, there to brood over his injuries until they grew, as all wrongs real or imaginary do grow with thinking on, to gigantic proportions. He came home late and unsuccessful, probably for want of the patience and coolness necessary to the good sportsman. They were a silent party in the hall that evening; Alfgar was both sulky and sleepy, and his mother and sister thought of the new parting, and of the girl who had grown dear to them, in her dreary, unloving home.

"We want our minstrel back to cheer us all," said Eadgyth by-and-by, looking at the harp which Conan had hung upon the wall; "he would charm us into happiness by the sound of his voice."

"Ay, indeed, mistress," said one young maid, half under her breath, looking up with wide eyes from her spinning; "and small wonder, if all be true that men say."

"What say they now?" asked Eadgyth smiling.

"Even that the strange guest knew more than most men," said the girl mysteriously.

"I wot well he does," said Eadgyth; "he comes from a land of scholars, and is one of the wisest among them, I trow. Hast only just found that out, Hildyth?"

"A man may know more than he should," murmured Hildyth, over her spinning. "Some say that witches and warlocks, who deal with evil powers, can go about among men in a fair enough shape,

and even sit unquestioned by good men's hearths. Remember, lady, how the stranger witched the daughter of Sexwulf by his singing!"

"Ay, even as David in Holy Writ witched the evil spirit from King Saul," said Eadgyth, readily. "I would say the Scottish singer had stolen his music from Heaven rather than from the evil powers."

"Nor is that all, mistress," persisted the maid. "Ingwald here says that he did but lay hands on the sick man in Cuthred's hut, and he was whole and strong straightway."

"Then Ingwald slept at the hut door, and dreamt of what he saw there, and I was by the side of the sick man and saw him right well tended by the Scot, and felt that God in mercy had given him much healing skill, and wisdom and goodness of heart to use it. Talk not such folly of our guest, Hildyth. Did he not come hither with Father Wulfstan?"

"He is a stranger," murmured Hildyth, rather abashed, but still unsatisfied.

"Wherefore not? 'Tis well for us to have strangers come among us and teach us what we know not. Our noble king loves to have them ever at his court. Knowest thou that he has set aside a portion of his goods for such foreigners as come to him from other lands? Give me my harp, and let me try to sing some of these charms thou art afraid of, though my voice is like to spoil them all. May our minstrel be with us again to-morrow night, unless he have flown away in the dark, like the spirits of the air."

But in spite of their young mistress' laughter, Hildyth and some of the other maids were inclined to shake their heads next day when Conan did not

appear. Eadgyth rallied them about their fear of his spells, and finally invited them to come themselves to old Cuthred's cottage with her and view his magic, since she meant to go and find out whether he had not bewitched her patient. She was used enough to wandering about alone or with her girl companions, and was surprised when Wilfrid joined her outside the village, and took from her the basket of bread and meat that she was carrying.

"Comest thou, Wilfrid?" she asked, as he strode along beside her.

"Ay, 'tis not fit for a company of maids to go thus alone," he answered.

"Why, what fearest thou? 'Tis broad daylight. Dost thou dread Conan's spells, like Hildyth, who has scarce courage to go with me?"

"I fear flesh and blood more," said Wilfrid, smiling, "or I hope I fear it not; but we are not so many leagues from the Thames, Lady Eadgyth, and we have East Anglia for our neighbour."

"Oh, is it the Northmen?" gasped one of the girls in terror.

"There is no word of them here yet," said Wilfrid, "but in Thames river they are; and if Hasting be with them, as some say, he is not a man to let time slip by when spring is coming on."

The party walked on in silence, the two younger girls clasping each other's hands. After seven years of peace and well-being the old fear seemed to be stirring again. They could all remember the last Danish raid upon Rochester, and stories of the slaying and burning of fifteen years before, when the Northmen overran the country, had been familiar to them

from their babyhood. The "great army," as it was called, the ever-active company of pirates, now dispersing in different directions, now gathering under one chief or another, hung still like a thunder-cloud over Northern Europe. France and Germany had been struggling with them throughout these seven years of England's peace, their dreaded sails had been seen, now in the Seine, now off the Saxon shore. Thrust back by hard fighting from one point, they appeared in another, reinforced by fresh ships and men from their own land, and the fame of their captain, Hasting, had spread far and wide. People might forget their fear—might, more likely, grow accustomed to it; but there it was always in the background, ready at a moment to come forward and overshadow their lives. As King Alfred himself said, speaking of the ruler over whose head a sword hung always ready to fall, "So it has been ever with me."

So the girls walked on silently in the February sunshine, and glanced half-fearfully at every bush and coppice, as if the arms of a Dane might flash suddenly out of the shadow. Hildyth even cried out when, just as they turned into the path through the woods, some one came pushing through the thick undergrowth and tall fern. It was no one very alarming, however—only old Frigyth, hobbling along at her best speed over the rough ground, and stopping at sight of Eadgyth.

"Why, Frigyth," cried the girl, "we were on our way to thee, and thou comest to meet us! How does thy charge? Hast left him to the leech?"

"Ah, lady," panted the old woman, "I came hither to tell thee how he is gone."

"Gone!" exclaimed Eadgyth. "What? He is not dead?"

"Nay, nay, lady. Rather he was well-nigh cured —surely by some charm of the wondrous stranger, who cures men by his touch. For the lad woke yester even like another man, and ate all the broth I gave him, and talked with the stranger, though I know not all they said, being dull of hearing, as thou wottest, lady; but methinks he asked of where he was and what had befallen him, and I know not if he told the stranger of his name and kindred. But at the dawning hour, when he was sleeping again as sound as a babe in its cradle, the leech went forth into the wood to seek for some herbs which have wondrous healing power. And, ill befall me for it, I fell asleep, dear lady, and woke to feel the cold air blowing on me, and there was the door open, and the lad there no longer."

"Had he risen and gone forth alone?" exclaimed Eadgyth.

"Methought he had, lady, as men in a fever are like to do such things; and I prayed Heaven forgive me that I left him unwatched. But, lady, there was the track of horses in the ground up to the door, and I will ever swear some spell was on me that I heard them not."

"But our friend, the scholar, came he not back? What said he?"

"Oh yes, surely, lady, back he came indeed, and was full of wonderment, as well he might be, but he said but little, only he put his cloak about him, and went forth after the tracks. And he bade me come hither to you. He said I was to seek the lady, and

Wilfrid, son of Anlaf, the lady's house-carle, and tell them that he was gone to follow his patient and his patient's comrades, and that Wilfrid was to look that his lady's men remembered that they dwelt nigh the East Anglian line. He said the words over and over, and made me say them after him till I knew them well. Only I hope they be no spell, for I think he is more than mortal man."

"They be no spell, Frigyth; fear not," said Eadgyth reassuringly.

"But perchance of greater import than if they were," said Wilfrid.

"What thinkest thou then, Wilfrid?"

"Even as I have thought from the first—that the lad was one of a party from a Danish ship, seeking plunder, perchance, or, more likely, a place for a camp for the whole army."

Eadgyth stood aghast a moment, then exclaimed, with sudden recollection—

"Nay, Wilfrid, he was no pagan. He wore the holy cross about his neck, and held it dear; even when he scarce knew what he did, he held it fast."

"Did he so?" said Wilfrid, thoughtfully. "I saw it not; yet that, too, might be plunder taken from a Christian house or a captive."

"But are the pagans here then, lady?" gasped Hildyth, with terrified eyes.

"We know nought, Hildyth, we can but guess. It is Conan who will bring us the news. Doubtless it is in care for us all that he is following them, and he will return to tell us."

"Oh, mistress, let us go home," said the other girl, half sobbing.

"Yes, Eanfled, we will go home; but thou must not begin to weep yet. Belike there are no pagans here at all, and, if there are, we shall be ready for them; shall we not, Wilfrid?"

"No fear but we shall," he answered cheerily; "we are not like the coast folks, on whom they can fall without warning. This can be at most but a small party of plunderers, and before they can come in force we will raise the country, and have Ethelred the ealdorman from London, and Edward the athel-ing, if not the king himself."

"And where he is all will be well," said Eadgyth contentedly; "and we must have no frightening of the village with long faces and weeping, and the less said the better, save to my mother and the fighting men." Then, turning to the old dame, she bade her come back with them.

"We will have thee home with us, Frigyth," she said kindly; "'tis too lonely for thee and Cuthred there in the wood, and, if there be strange folks about, thou wert better with us at Brockstede."

But Frigyth shook her head. She thanked the lady, but they would not leave their hut. They were used to being there, and, if evil people came to plunder, there was nothing to take, and the powers of ill could not harm them there in the wood. In fact, she had that dread of the powers of witchcraft within walls which kept the Saxons so long from building lasting fortifications. She would sooner face the Danes, with fire and sword, than leave the little hovel which was home to her, and risk the spells and charms which she believed were powerful in any enclosed place. Only she accepted gladly the food

in Eadgyth's basket, and hobbled off with it, promising to let them know if her late patient or his comrades returned.

"Methinks Conan's news will come the swiftest," said Eadgyth, as they turned towards home; "if any can follow and find them, he will. May he but run into no danger! The pagans have done him already cruel enough wrong. Heaven keep him from them."

And Wilfrid thought to himself that the young Scot was safe enough, since, besides his own wisdom and dexterity, he was hedged about with Eadgyth's prayers.

And so the note of danger spread through the little homestead, to be met as such news is met by those to whom danger has long been familiar. Men sighed over the brief, happy time of peace, and turned sternly and without surprise to test their weapons and talk of their defences. Women looked on their children and trembled, but said little, many of them betaking themselves, with a wisdom lost sometimes in peaceful days, and won again in the shadow of war and peril, to the church, to pray the old prayer for deliverance from the old enemy. Only one person was aloof from the general anxiety. Alfgar had gone out early as on the day before, hawking along the low ground by the river. It was a brilliant day, with an exhilarating freshness in the air. Hawks flew and horses galloped well, and it was not in boy nature to resist the healthy influences of fresh air and sunshine, quick movement and good sport. Alfgar's voice, as he called his bird in, had its wonted joyous ring. He felt in tune with his surroundings again, and in good humour with the world

as he cantered along over the springy turf, leaving his followers far behind him. He was in a mood to forgive every one, even to own to some faults of his own, and to ride home his own bright, happy-hearted self again. And then, as he left the meadows to take the way home, there came the clatter of hoofs to meet him, and round a bend in the road came a band of armed horsemen, the foremost of whom was Sweyne, the Danish earl. Alfgar was not altogether pleased to see him. The sullen rebellion of the last two days was so foreign to his nature that he would really have been glad to have done with it, and come back to his old happy allegiance to his mother and trust in Wilfrid; but he felt that in Sweyne's company he would have to keep up the independent character he had assumed. So he drew bridle and waited, without very much eagerness, for his new acquaintance, who hailed him warmly, and came spurring towards him.

"Ha, my thegn," he cried, "whither away? But I should have no need to ask, save that thou ridest with hawk and hound instead of the sword and spear I looked for."

"Wherefore so?" asked Alfgar.

"Wherefore but to join Ethelred the ealdorman? Knowest thou not that he leads the men of London against Hasting's camp at Milton, and all the young men who have their names to make flock to the banner of Mercia?"

"I knew it not," said Alfgar, breathing hard, while the colour flushed into his cheeks.

"Then am I happy to be the bearer of good tidings to thee, my thegn, knowing well that the ealdorman

may count on thine aid as the king looked of old for thy father's."

"Goest thou to join him?" asked Alfgar, longingly.

The Dane was bending low over his horse's neck, adjusting the bridle. He looked up after an instant, and laughed gaily.

"Where else should I be going? I am weary of quiet life, and I go to give the aid of my arm to this noble son-in-law of the king. Come with me, Alfgar, and see thy first warfare by my side."

"I am not armed," said Alfgar, looking at his hunting dress.

"No matter; we will better that in camp, and thou mayest send word to thy folk to follow thee. Thou wilt lose the chance of the fair fight if thou delayest."

Alfgar knew that there was stronger reason yet for not returning home, but would have died rather than own to Sweyne that he had not authority to bid his father's men follow him, and might well be detained himself. It was a chance of distinction such as he had dreamt of. Why not follow the gallant ealdorman, even as his father had fought beside Alfred the atheling at Ashdown? Then, when he came back famous, his mother and Wilfrid might understand that he was no child to be watched over, and sent to school, but one fit to take his father's place. Yet he hesitated a moment until Sweyne spoke again, laughing.

"Pardon me, friend Alfgar, I forget that thou art no rover like myself, but an English noble with lands and goods to make thee bide at home. Doubtless thy father's man will lead thy followers by-and-by to join

the ealdorman, if thou canst spare him from protecting thine own homestead. At least thou must see him and take counsel ere thou act hastily."

Alfgar's face flushed dark-red, and his hand clenched hard on his bridle.

"I ask counsel of none," he said hotly. "I will go with thee to join the ealdorman, and show thee that an English noble is as ready for a fray as a Northern Viking."

He wheeled his horse round to meet the two serfs who had just come up.

"Go home," he said shortly, "and tell my mother that I ride with Sweyne, the Danish earl, and that she shall hear news of me such as fits my father's son."

The two men stared. They were both young and used to obedience, but such tones were new from their young master, who was always kind and friendly with his dependents.

"'Tis late, master," suggested one of them; "and they will have looked for us at home ere now."

Alfgar felt Sweyne's eyes upon him, and took refuge in a flash of anger.

"I am not bound to be back at the hour folks choose to look for me. Dost hear my orders? Home with thee straight, and give my message. Earl Sweyne, I will delay you no longer."

And putting spurs to his horse, he himself led the way at a brisk trot along the road. He was too young and too really affectionate and true-hearted not to regret the step he had taken before he had ridden a mile. His mother's tender, reproachful face kept rising before him in the glowing sunset light, until he

had well-nigh turned his horse's head and galloped homewards, leaving Sweyne to think what he pleased. He thought of his own empty place in the hall, and of how he and Eadgyth had drawn close to their mother when first his father's seat stood unfilled. To-night there would be another gap, and what would they do, those two loving women, who would have sent him forth unhesitatingly had duty or honour called him away? Then he hardened his heart by telling himself that Wilfrid could console them well enough. They sought no protection, no comfort from him, the heir, the thegn's only son. He was only a child to be sent to school to read and learn his Latin grammar. They would have the Scot too, very likely, to jingle on the harp to them and tell tales: how they all hung upon his words as he talked and sung. Very like it was true, as folks said, and he was no more nor less than a wizard, who had dealings with evil powers. So he mused, arguing against his own better self, while Sweyne talked and laughed at his side, and asked questions, which generally he would have been proud enough to answer, about his own father's doughty deeds done in battle by the king's side. The sun had set and the twilight was deepening when their road brought them to the riverside again. Sweyne had said that by another hour's riding they would reach one of those "cold harbours," as they were called, old houses by the roadside, roofed in to make a shelter for travellers who had failed to reach more hospitable quarters by nightfall.

"Rough lodging, but good enough for warriors," said the Dane; "and my fellows have the means of fire and food. Here must we ford the river," and he

led the way through a grove of trees, where already it was nearly dark. But, as they reached the bank, the still stream before them glowed suddenly with a ruddy light, flaming up behind them in the twilight sky. Alfgar turned with an exclamation, and looked behind him. On the highest ground in the neighbourhood a lofty pillar of flame streamed up, a fiery banner with flying sparks like scattered stars in the gathering darkness. The boy turned aghast to his companion.

"The beacon," he cried, "the need-fire! The Danes are here, at my home; I must go back."

Even as he spoke a blow from behind made him reel in his saddle. He flung up his hands with a half cry, and dropped from his horse, stunned and senseless on the river bank.

CHAPTER IX

For Eadgyth's Sake

"Walking the new Earth,
Lo! a Divine One.
It is the White Christ,
Stronger than Thor."

LOWELL.

FOR hours after that Alfgar knew nothing of what happened. When consciousness returned to him at all, it came in the sense of stupefying pain, and in the knowledge that he was moving somewhere and would have given all he possessed to be allowed to rest and be still. Yet he went on continually through the darkness, with his head throbbing and aching more distractingly at every jolt and shaking. Boys' skulls are generally reputed to be proof against hard knocks, and Alfgar's must have had all the toughness of a strong and stubborn race, or that dastardly blow must have killed him outright. But he did not die, only lay and moaned in suffering and discomfort, until the rapid movement ceased at last, and he opened his

eyes for an instant to close them again dizzily before the glare of lights, and turn his head away from the sound of rough voices. And when he was laid down, none too tenderly, on a heap of straw, he was too thankful for the rest and relief to attempt to ask or even wonder where he was. So he lay for hours again, conscious of very little except the desire for darkness and rest. He knew dimly that there was daylight where he was, and that he turned away and shut his eyes from it, and, when at last he opened them again, the light had gone and only fire-light played between the cracks in the boarded walls of the place in which he lay. It brought to his dulled senses the recollection of a fire he had seen at some time—which seemed to him long ago—a fire which had lit up the sky and glowed red on the water, and brought with it a sense of fear and dismay which he could not yet understand. But Alfgar's head was, as we have said, a hard one; perhaps it was some compensation for the slowness in learning that Father Wulfstan so much regretted, that the brain which took so little to books could bear hard blows without suffering for very long. And thus it was that Alfgar, after lying still for what seemed to him like weeks, and knitting his aching forehead over the confusion of recollections, suddenly recalled everything, and knew that the fire which had impressed itself upon his last conscious thoughts was the beacon lighted by a warning hand on the hill, and flaming out to the country round the news that the Danish bands were out on their work of destruction. And with that recollection came the horror which had swept over him in the moment before he fell, as he realized that

his home and those he loved were in peril, and that he was not there to aid them or, at least, to share the danger.

As the remembrance came to him with the same quick sting of remorse and horror, the boy sprang to his feet, to stagger back giddily against the wooden wall of the rough building in which he had been lying. He stood leaning against it, with his hands over his eyes, while all the recollection of his meeting with Sweyne and flight from home surged over him like a chilling wave. He remembered the conviction that had come to him like a lightning flash in the instant before he fell at the ford, the certainty that he had been tricked and betrayed. The grim smile on the face of one of Sweyne's men had been the last thing impressed upon his sight, as he turned his eyes to ask the meaning of the beacon fire flaming on the hill. Then had come the cowardly blow from behind, which had stunned and might well have killed him. He looked round the room where he had been lying. It was only a roughly built hut, bare of furniture, save for a bench and a heap of straw. The only window, a mere slit in the wall, looked on to a high wooden palisade close outside it, and in the dim light, which might have been evening twilight or grey dawn, Alfgar knew not which, there was nothing to be seen from it or through the cracks in the boarding except the light of a bonfire, streaming sideways in the wind. The door was securely fastened on the outside. Evidently he was a prisoner, captive to the relentless enemy who might even now be plundering the ruins of his home. Had he turned back when he met Sweyne he would at least have shared the danger

with them, might even have warned them of its approach. Stories common enough among the village folks of the horrors of a Danish raid, of the plundering, the burning, the wholesale slaughter, the treatment of women and children, came over him with sickening recollection. Here, then, was the end of his plans for taking his father's place, for assuming the protection of his mother and sister and the responsibility of the position that Bernulf had won by his valour. His home might be sacked, his dear ones slain or prisoners, and he lay here in the enemy's hands through nothing but his own folly and rebellion. He flung himself down again on the straw, and sobbed in passionate boyish abandonment of grief and remorse and indignation as he thought of how he had been tricked. He sobbed in utter weakness and helplessness until he was worn out, and lay still, with his face hidden, feeling as if life were over for him, and with no care or interest as to his future fate. He did not even notice when the door opened and a step came across the floor, until the light of a torch held over him made him lift his head wearily and look up. Half seen in the smoky light, a tall figure stood beside him, towering above him in the gloom, and the flame, blown sideways by the draught through the chinks in the wall, fell upon a pale face surrounded by rough yellow hair. Alfgar gave a cry of startled recognition and crouched low at the man's feet, hiding his face.

"Father," he sobbed, "Oh, father, look not so at me. I would have died to save them. Pardon me in mercy."

"I am no father of thine," said a strange voice with

a half laugh. "Hold up thy head instead of weeping like a girl. I am not here to slay thee."

Alfgar raised his eyes still half fearfully, and realized that the new-comer, despite the likeness which had startled him and which he could still see, was a lad some five or six years older than himself. He stuck the torch he carried into a ring in the wall of the hut, and sat down on the bench, looking down on Alfgar with a sort of amused interest. He was a mighty young fellow, six feet and over in height, and broad to match, but thin and gaunt, with his great blue eyes sunken, as Alfgar had seen his father's in the days of his last illness.

"Wert thou feared that I was come to slay thee," he demanded, "that thou didst beg my pardon so earnestly?"

"I took thee for my father, who is dead," said Alfgar.

The other laughed.

"No spirit am I, young Englishman, I belong yet to the world of the living, though I have been like to leave it. Thou needst not fear."

"I fear thee not," said Alfgar indifferently; "thou canst slay me if thou wilt."

"I trow I can, boy, even if my arm has not yet all its fighting strength. But I am not in the mind to do it, which is the better for thee."

"I care not," said the boy, turning his face from the light; "I had as lief thou didst."

"Then thou art a fool for thy pains, young Englishman, since there is plenty of fighting and pleasure in the world, and thou mayest bless the gods thy life has been spared and thou hast a chance of

being put to ransom. Or, if they take thee over seas, I have myself been a slave and won my freedom, and thou mayest do the like. 'Twere better to vow thou wilt do such than to lie there and weep like a sick wench."

Something in the reproach stung Alfgar into self-control, at least before his captor. He straightened himself with an effort and sat upright, meeting those deep, keen blue eyes fixed on him curiously.

"Is my home at Brockstede sacked?" he asked abruptly. The other answered him as straightforwardly.

"I know not. Our bands went out yestereven and none are yet returned. 'Twas our friends from East Anglia brought thee in at midnight, and left thee here, only binding us not to slay thee."

"I thank them little for it," said Alfgar between his teeth.

"Then I say again thou art a fool. Thou hadst best eat and drink and change thy mind. I will fetch thee some food, and thou wilt say thou art better here than under the ground."

He went out of the room, while Alfgar sat still, too dazed and miserable to wonder or care much about his own prospects of safety or freedom. He was but little inclined for the food which the young Dane brought and set beside him, but thankful for a jug of milk from which he drank long draughts thirstily. His gaoler, if such he was, left him alone again, advising him good-humouredly to eat and think he was at his own board. When he came back he found the young prisoner kneeling, with clasped hands and face hidden, in a corner of the room. He turned and

rose to his feet at the sound of the door opening, and the Dane, sitting down on the wooden bench, stared at him curiously as he had done before.

"Art praying to the Englishman's God?" he asked.

"To the God of Heaven and earth," said Alfgar simply.

"What dost ask of Him?" demanded the other again.

"Forgiveness for my sinfulness," replied the boy, with his pale face flushing, but speaking with manful straightforwardness, "and that I alone bear the punishment."

"That is a strange prayer," said the Dane, as if interested. "Thinkest thou He hears thee?"

"I trow He does," said Alfgar, "though I merit it little."

"Ye are strange folks, ye Christians," was the answer. "Think ye that your God can give you victory?"

"Ay, surely we do," said Alfgar readily, "so the cause be good, though there be hard fighting first."

The young Dane stared at him a moment in silence, and then, fumbling in the breast of his tunic, he drew out a gold ornament and held it out, gleaming in the torch-light.

"What means that?" he asked abruptly.

"It is the holy Cross," said Alfgar, looking at it in surprise.

"Well, what of it? Wherefore do you Christians hold it dear?"

"Because upon it the Lord Christ died for the saving of the world," said Alfgar. "How comest thou to wear it, who serve Odin and Thor?"

"Because 'tis mine and none other's," said the Dane, drawing the cross back as if fearful of losing it, "and he who tries to take it from me had best guard his head. And as for the worship of Odin and Thor, I serve the mightiest lord, who gives victory to his followers. Guthrum, the Dane, did so, when your king routed him at Ethandune, and he swore to serve the God Who made the Christians conquerors."

He drew out the cross again and looked long at it, then spoke slowly like one talking in sleep, hesitating now and then as if uncertain of the words.

> "Girded Him then the youthful Hero
> That was God Almighty.
> Strong and firm of mind
> He mounted the lofty gallows,
> Fearless in the sight of men."

"How knowest thou that?" asked Alfgar, interested in spite of himself.

"I know not," said the other with a half laugh, "mayhap I dreamt it. I have dreamt many a strange thing of late. Hast heard it before?"

"That have I," said Alfgar. "'Tis the 'Dream of the Holy Rood.'"

The other nodded.

"I have dreamt of those words too, methinks. Is thy God then dead, and yet thou lookest for Him to give thee victory?"

"He died and lives again," said Alfgar reverently; "'tis therefore we call Him Conqueror, since He vanquished death, too, for us. But if thou wouldst learn of Him, Dane, thou shouldst go to one wiser than I, who have not wit enough to guide myself."

It was a strange fortune, certainly, that had brought the boy, in the hour of his own bitter humiliation, to be the teacher of another. He spoke the truths he had learnt from his babyhood simply, almost as if he were repeating a lesson, but the reality of them forced itself upon him as well as upon his listener, with a new conviction which he had never felt before.

The Dane thrust the cross out of sight under his tunic.

"I choose mine own teachers," he answered. "Tell me, dost thou know a maid of thy people named Eadgyth?"

"There are scores of maids called so," said Alfgar; "'tis my sister's name."

"What like is thy sister? Is she tall, as tall as thou art, with yellow hair and eyes like thine, and a soft voice, and clad in a white kirtle with a gold chain about her neck?"

"Ay, that is such as she is, nay *was* maybe," said Alfgar bitterly, "if thy people have been there; 'tis well known how they treat maidens."

"I shall slay the man who touches her," said the Dane coolly.

"What matter is it of thine?" said Alfgar, with the impatience of misery. "She is nought to thee."

Then, as a sudden remembrance flashed across his brain, he exclaimed—

"Art thou the sick stranger she tended? Is it for that thou savedst my life?"

"For the saving of thy life 'twas no matter of mine," said the Dane; "those that brought thee hither know best why thou wert spared. For the rest, 'tis a fancy of mine to pay my debts, though I knew not she was

thy sister. Nor do I think it now," he added doubtfully, "for I have seen yonder maiden before ever she tended me in the hut, where they left me with the old hag to die or live as I chose. 'Twas in some dream she came first and knelt as thou didst and said such words as those, about the cross thou tellest of, which have been ever in my mind since then. No earthly maiden is she, I trow. But whatever she be, she has sent me back to life again, and she shall have no harm at my hands."

He looked silently on the ground for a minute, then raised his eyes to Alfgar's face.

"Thinkest thou she weeps for thee?" he asked shortly.

"Ay, if she be living," said the boy sadly. "Hast no mother or sister of thine own that thou askest me?"

"Neither mother nor sister have I," said the Dane roughly; "nay, nor father nor brother either, nor living soul that would mourn long had I died in the old woman's hut. Therefore folks call me Osbern, the Fatherless. Bagsac fetched me thence because I have the best wit of them all for taking a boat through rocks and rough water, and he was loath to be without me; but, had he no need of me, he had little cared."

He was silent again for a moment, then rose suddenly.

"Canst thou walk?" he asked abruptly.

"Ay, that I can," said Alfgar eagerly.

"And hast thou any wit about thee to find thy path?"

"Ay, if it were the path home," said the boy, with a light coming into his eyes.

"Thy home may be ashes for all I know. I promise thee nought. I had waited till to-morrow, for I trow thou canst scarce keep thy feet, but in an hour it may be too late for thee. There is talk in the camp that thy king is coming, and, if it be so, we shall be away and back to our boats without waiting for him, and then they are not very like to trouble themselves with prisoners for the sake of those that would have thy life spared. Here is a dagger, 'tis not thine own, the man that brought thee hither kept that. The bolts are but of wood, and rotten. There is a gap in the fence behind this hut, and the stream below is but waist deep. Thou mayest be drowned, or lose thy way, or be taken again, that is thy affair. Mayhap the God thou servest will have thee in His keeping if the maiden asks it of Him. Take the dagger, and farewell. I am weary to death and shall sleep till dawn or till thy king comes to wake me."

He flung the dagger at Alfgar's feet and was gone in an instant out into the darkness.

The boy had been too bewildered to take in the whole meaning of his rapid speech, but, as the door was closed and fastened, and he saw, by the light through the cracks, the dagger on the ground, the truth dawned upon him that the chance of escape was before him. For Eadgyth's sake this heathen enemy had given him the means of freedom. He might make his way home, know the worst at all events, at least, perhaps, die with those he loved if he could do nothing to help them. The aching head and dizzy brain were forgotten as hope rushed back to him. He snatched up the dagger, and examined

the door. As his deliverer had said, the fastenings were of wood, and rotten. Groping in the dim light he found the bolt, got his knife through the opening and, with a few desperate efforts, cut it through. The door opened to his push, a rush of cold moist air was in his face, and he stood outside in the darkness of a wet, windy night. The watch-fire, which he had seen through the cracks and openings in the wall, burnt low some hundred yards away. A cluster of huts and farm buildings, probably some deserted village, had been seized and roughly fortified as a temporary camp. He could see dark figures passing between himself and the flames, and heard voices close to him. The boy's courage and resource rose with the danger. He dropped on hands and knees and crawled on the wet earth round to the back of the hut. As Osbern had said, the wooden palisade which had been hastily put up along the river-bank was broken just at that point, and there was a space through which a boy might force his way. But close to it stood an armed Dane, a dark figure only distinguishable when he moved. Alfgar crouched against the wall of the hut with his heart throbbing hard. He had the dagger still in his hand, and he was desperate. The plan formed itself in his mind of rushing upon the sentinel, stabbing him in the suddenness of the surprise, and making his escape. At that moment he felt strong enough for anything and careless of the risk against him. What did it matter, after all, if he lost the life he had disgraced? He clutched the dagger hard, crawled nearer and held his breath for a spring. Then, out of the shadow into the dim light where the sentinel stood,

came another figure, towering tall above him. Alfgar felt sick with disappointment. He might have surprised one man, he could not deal with two. For a moment he felt inclined to throw himself upon them notwithstanding, and let them kill him if they chose. Then the new-comer said something in low tones; the other turned and followed him a few paces away. Alfgar understood in a moment. It was his friend who was clearing the way for him. If he missed this chance he might have no other. The wind rose at that moment into a wild gust, and, sweeping through the trees, drowned the crashing of the breaking wood as the boy forced his way through the stockade, nearly falling headlong into dark water with a splash which might have betrayed him. The Danes had, as usual, chosen the place for their camp upon the bank of a stream. Alfgar clung with both hands to the dripping grass, and lowered himself cautiously. Even at the edge the water was up to his waist, and the bank shelved down rapidly. Alfgar could swim like a fish, but the stream was strong and nothing but desperation kept up his flagging strength. Breathless and gasping he touched the opposite bank at last, dragged himself up, and lay there for a moment. Then sounds from across the river nerved him to get up and run, utterly ignorant of where he was or whither he was going, so that he left the Danish camp behind him. If he formed any plan at all, it was to struggle on until he had put a safe distance between himself and his late captors, then crawl into some thicket and lie there till daylight gave him some idea of his whereabouts. He looked fearfully behind him now and then, but the dark outline of

the camp and the glow of the fire were no longer visible. He had struggled up a hill and put the rising ground behind him, and he breathed more freely, though indeed he had hardly strength left to think clearly of anything. A pale, watery moon rode clear now and then of the drifting clouds, and showed him the country round, gently undulating pasture land, with black masses of forest stretching away to the southward. A brook, swollen by the rain, lay just in his way, and the high bank, crumbling with the wet, gave way under his feet as he tried to jump, and sent him stumbling down into the muddy water. He dragged himself painfully up the opposite side, hands and knees slipping on the stiff wet clay, to meet, as he reached the top, a sight which seemed to stop his breath, an armed man, with the pale moonlight gleaming on his helmet, standing just above him. The only thought that rushed into the boy's confused brain was that his captors had overtaken him after all. With a shout of desperation he drew his dagger, and sprang at the man who barred his way. But his foot slipped on the muddy ground, he struck short, fell full length and lay, bitterly aware that his attempt had failed and that his resources were at an end.

"Heaven have mercy!" he gasped faintly, and shut his eyes in expectation of the blow that would finish everything. Instead, a low voice, thrilling with great earnestness, spoke above him—

"Blessed be God!"

Then strong, gentle hands raised his head, wine was put to his lips, and his cold fingers chafed with a soft touch. Alfgar opened his eyes and looked up

into a face which had watched by his cradle, gazing down upon him now with a world of thankfulness and tenderness in the grave eyes.

"Wilfrid," he faltered, half thinking he must be dreaming.

"Yes, fear nothing, rest thee a moment; all is well."

"My mother," gasped Alfgar, "and my sister, what of them?"

"Safe and well, save for fear for thee."

The relief was more overpowering than any danger. The boy burst into tears and clung to Wilfrid like a child. The young soldier soothed and caressed him as tenderly as his mother might have done.

"We will be with them before the sun be high," he said; "and the lady herself will care for thee. Art thou wounded, or only worn and spent? 'Tis too dark to see."

"Nay, I have no hurt," said the boy, "save a blow on my head which is nought now. Wilfrid, thou forgivest?"

"What have I to pardon, Alfgar? Thanks be to Heaven we have thee again. Rest here a moment while I fetch my horse; I tied him in yonder thicket while I searched on foot."

"Leave me not," said Alfgar, clutching him involuntarily, and then, loosening his hold, "nay, go if need be; thou knowest best."

For answer Wilfrid lifted him bodily in his arms, and strode across the wet grassland to a thicket of trees, to one of which his sturdy, black horse was fastened by the bridle.

"Beowulf may well carry double," he said, lifting the boy into the saddle and springing up behind him. "Art thou at ease so?" he asked gently, drawing the aching, giddy head to rest against his own broad breast.

Alfgar's answer was a long sigh of relief, and he said nothing for a few minutes, while the sure-footed steed picked his way carefully over the rough ground under the trees. Then he asked—

"Did the pagans sack Brockstede?"

"Nay; thanks to the hand, whosesoever it was, that lighted the need-fire. 'Twas just in time for us to make ready, and we had a warm welcome for them. I doubt our own folks alone could have beaten them off, but they fled like wind before the king."

"The king?"

"Ay, the king himself. Thou wilt find noble company awaiting thee."

"I want no more company," sighed the boy. "A fine ado I made with the last traitor guest."

"'Twas his work then," said Wilfrid between his teeth. "His men must have brought thee hither, for he was among his East Anglian kindred who came upon us last night. Did he deal thee the blow?"

"I know not if 'twas he or one of his men. They told me 'twas his will to spare my life."

"There may be worse than he behind," said Wilfrid musingly.

"Yet I doubt his will had little helped me when they broke up their camp," Alfgar went on. "It had been short work with me but for Eadgyth."

"What of her?" asked Wilfred in surprise.

Alfgar told the story of his strange deliverance.

"'Tis little enough of my own skill or prowess I have to thank for it," he said; "'twas Eadgyth first, and then thou, Wilfrid, for hadst thou been a foe I had struck my last blow, methinks."

"'Tis a strange thing," said Wilfrid thoughtfully, "how a good deed fails not of its fruit. I little thought when I chafed at her tending a wandering vagabond that it was to be the saving of thy life."

"Yonder pagan knew his friends better than I," said Alfgar sadly. "I had only wit enough to leave them at the bidding of my foes. And that thou shouldst be walking into the wolf's mouth thus to seek me! Wilfrid, didst hear Eadgyth say that yonder Dane had my father's face?"

"Ay, she said so; and there was truth in it. Though, methinks, 'twas rather that he looked as the thegn did when last she tended him."

"Nay, Wilfrid, 'twas not that. She spoke true enough. When he first came to me, methought it was my father come to ask me what did I there while the pagans harried my home and slew those he left there. Oh, Wilfrid, I had sooner died than face his eyes. If he knows yet what befalls us here, he will own me no more for his son. And the king, who vowed to be father to me, he'll have none of me now. Alack! I had better have died among the Danes."

The boy's voice broke down in a strangled sob of weariness and remorse, and Wilfrid's quiet voice had a ring of wonderful tenderness as he answered—

"So said I once, even those very words, to my blessed lady, Edburga. At her feet I lay and came nigh to cursing the mercy that spared me to bear for ever the shame of a coward."

Alfgar lifted his head in wonder.

"Thou a coward, Wilfrid? Never! I'll hear none say so."

"Yet that I was. A cowardly lad that fled before the enemy, and by so doing, betrayed my friends and gave them to the Danish swords. The death of thy young brother, for whom I would have given my life, and of many another beside, lies on my head, and in those days I never thought to lift my face to the world again. Then came thy mother, as a very angel from Heaven, and spoke words which God alone taught her, bidding me see that He Who spared my life must needs have more work for me than to spend my days in mourning for the past. She trusted me, me who had lost her her first-born son, and so did thy father and, through him, the good king also. Every day of my life I pray God bless them for it. They would tell me that they had forgotten the past, and if I forget it not, as all my life I never shall, it does but urge me to be more worthy of their forgiveness."

Wilfrid spoke slowly, with the quiet earnestness of a man who rarely talks of himself. Even to the boy he had known from babyhood he could scarcely have told so much, save to help him through the bitter moments that he knew so well, and the very strangeness of hearing such words from him, impressed and helped Alfgar as nothing else could have done.

"Thinkest thou the king will yet let me serve him for my father's sake?" he said wistfully.

"Ay, that will he," said Wilfrid confidently. "The king is the wisest man in England and, methinks, the best, and if thou wilt be guided by me thou wilt trust

him wholly, and abide by his rede and by thy mother's, whose counsel nobles and warriors have followed and done wisely."

"Ay and by thine, to whom my father trusted me," said Alfgar. And, lifting his face in the darkness, he drew Wilfrid's head down and kissed him with the earnest simplicity of a little child.

CHAPTER X

The King's Justice

"Thus quoth Alfred : 'Never let the young
Despair of good, nor give himself to wrong.
For Christ, when He will,
Gives good after ill,
And wealth by His grace
In trouble's hard place.'"

Early English Verses.

THE sun was high in the heavens when the black horse, muddy and weary, bore his double burden up to Brockstede. As they came to the outskirts of the village there was an eager rush of many who had been on the watch, ceorl and serf, eager to welcome the young master, or to bear the news of his safety to the anxious ones at home. The good news flew fast, and by the time the gate-house was reached, Eadgyth stood there, with radiant face, and hands outstretched in welcome.

"Ah, Wilfrid," she cried, as the horse stopped, "did I not know thou wouldst bring him? But, alack, is he wounded?" she added, as Wilfrid half lifted her brother from the saddle.

"Nought to speak of, Lady Eadgyth; but he is over weary and spent for many words."

"All will be well now we can care for him," said Eadgyth, with a ready arm around Alfgar; and Wilfrid stepped quietly back to take the tired horse to stable, leaving the two to go on to the house.

At the door stood Edburga, her fair face tremulous with joy, and beside her a stately figure, who turned kindly towards her as the brother and sister came in together.

"Thou seest, lady," he said, "thy trust was not misplaced."

"The king!" Eadgyth whispered to Alfgar, who, dazed and bewildered, sank on one knee.

Alfred raised him with kindly hands. "Welcome, my young thegn," he said; "we have missed our host very sorely. But thou art too weary to tell us now of all that has befallen, and wilt be best in these wise hands." And he turned with a smile to Edburga, whose arms were already about her son. Then, with thoughtful courtesy, he called the warriors about him aside to council, leaving the mother and children to each other.

Alfgar, carried off out of sight of the curious, rejoicing household, faltered out something of the confused confession, which only a mother's ears could understand, and then, with Edburga's kiss of forgiveness on his brow, slept the exhausted, dreamless sleep, which was the best medicine for mind and body. He woke, quite himself again, before sunrise next morning, to wonder for the first moment what had been happening; then to be reassured as the grey light from the east, the forerunner of the dawn,

stole through the high, unglazed window of his sleeping chamber, just touching the wooden crucifix which hung at the foot of the bed. The recollection of everything came back slowly upon him, with the remembrance that his home and those he loved were safe, and that he was free among his own folk, with the past to redeem in the future. With the return of strength and energy, and with all the love about him, it did not seem impossible, and there came to him an eager impulse to dedicate his life afresh to the right way, and seek help to keep it. Alfgar had plenty of boyish failings and shortcomings, but he was happy in belonging to a nation which owed its strength to its strong sense of an over-ruling Providence, and to the happy custom of bringing religious faith into all the joys and sorrows of the work-a-day life.

He rose and dressed quietly, then stole out in the twilight of the early morning into the still world, where the rime lay on the wet grass, and the east was yet cold and pale, untouched by the first flush of the sun. The little building, which was alike village church and private chapel to the lord of Brockstede, was close to the house ; the door was ajar, and Alfgar stepped in softly. A lamp burning before the altar flung a little patch of warm light on the pavement, and touched the bright colouring on the pictured walls, by which the wise care of those days sought to teach great truths to those who could not read for themselves. But Alfgar stopped surprised as the door fell back behind him. From the shadow outside the circle of light, a voice sounded, speaking low and with great earnestness. Some one was kneeling there

with bent head, and Alfgar, lingering, uncertain whether to go back, recognized the low tones as the king's.* He had not heard Alfgar enter, and the boy, fearing to disturb him, knelt himself softly near the door. In the silence of the little church the low-spoken words were clearly audible—

"O Lord God Almighty, I beseech Thee by Thy great mercy that Thou wouldst direct me better than I have done towards Thee, and direct me to Thy will and to my soul's need better than I myself know, and make steadfast my mind to Thy will and to my soul's need, and defend me against mine enemies, visible and invisible, and teach me to do Thy will, that I may inwardly love Thee before all things, with pure mind and pure body. For Thou art my Creator and my Redeemer, my Help, my Comfort, my Trust, and my Hope."

The boy, kneeling far away in the darkness by the church door, murmured a faltering "Amen" to the manly, reverent words; then, as the king rose and came towards him, he stood with bowed head in his way.

"Welcome, my young thegn," said Alfred kindly; "thou dost well to feel that here are due thy first thanks for thy safety."

"Oh, my lord, it is more than that," said the boy brokenly, lifting his face to the kind eyes that looked down upon him.

The king's face, worn with constant anxiety and by the bodily pain which rarely left him, looked haggard in the grey light of dawn; but there was

* "He also went to the churches in the night time to pray secretly and unknown to his courtiers" (Asser's "Life of Alfred").

upon it a certain radiant peace, as if his prayers had lifted him for the while beyond earth's fret and turmoil. Alfgar, looking up at him, felt half-awed and yet encouraged.

"My danger was of mine own seeking," he went on. "I had but mine own folly to thank had I died among the pagans. Ah, lord king, I had thought to fill my father's place."

"So wilt thou yet do," said the king kindly; "and the better that thou beginnest with the knowledge of thine own weakness. Let us hear the truth of the matter."

He sat down as he spoke on a stone seat in the church wall, making the boy sit beside him, while Alfgar felt as if his father had indeed returned to hear his shamefaced confession, and set him once more on the right track. For, even in the hour of harassing anxiety and threatened invasion, the king, who thought it no waste of time to hear his children repeat their poetry, and "to teach falconers and dog keepers their business," could find "a heart at leisure from itself," to listen to the bitter self-accusations of his young subject with the patience and understanding of a father.

"It seemeth to me, my boy," he said, when Alfgar had finished his story, "that this fall of thine is to be indeed for thy rising again, to stand on surer ground. Thou hast learnt to know true from false, and to value the love that would guide, not flatter thee, and to see that the snatching of thine own will is like to end in mishap and bitterness. Power and rule will come to thee anon, but desire it not before the time, for thou shalt never have it without trouble. So it

came to me, a lad of two and twenty, bringing me a kingdom ravaged and desolate, a people nigh broken-hearted, and foes on every side."

"I am not fit to rule," sighed Alfgar.

"Thou wilt grow fit. Say not I am reding thee cruel counsel, but I would yet have thee give thyself for a year to such study of letters as will go far to fit thee for the place thou hast to fill. So wilt thou be full fifteen years, thine own master, and on the way to man's estate, and thou mayest have, as for many a year I had myself, no quietness for such studies. How sayest thou?"

"That I will follow your counsel in all matters, my lord," said the boy readily.

"That is well," said Alfred, with his winning smile. "Heaven guide me to counsel thee wisely. Thou shalt ride with me from Brockstede so far as our ways lie together. And first must I hear again the story of thy falling into the hands of the pagans and of what thou sawest among them. It imports us to know whence this attack comes. They were Danes from East Anglia who came hither. Deemest thou that those who held yonder camp came also from thence?"

Alfgar told again the story of Sweyne's treachery, and described the little he had seen of the Danish camp.

"They may have had East Anglians among them," he said; "but he who saved me was but newly come from over seas. He asked me many questions concerning our holy faith, and, though he knew somewhat of it, and spoke words which I marvelled to hear from a pagan, 'twas as a memory of what he had learnt

long since, and he knew little of its meaning. And the cross he wore was doubtless plunder, for he asked me of its story as one who had not dwelt long in a Christian land."

"Did he so?" said Alfred with interest. "Mayhap thou hast been called into the pagan camp that thou mightest lead others to the truth. And as for the story of yonder stranger freeing thee for the sake of thy sister's deed of mercy, 'tis fit for a minstrel's singing, and shall be set down in the book in which I am wont to copy things good to be remembered. But thou must tell thy tale again, my young thegn, to the men of wit amongst my followers, and we must call that sage friend of thine, Wilfrid, to our council, and consider how such raids as these are best to be met and guarded against."

He rose as he spoke, and led the way out into the broadening light of the February morning. The sun was rising, a rim of bright gold over the hills, and the light flashed and gleamed upon the arms and accoutrements of two warriors who stood waiting on the threshold. One of them, a fine, thoughtful-faced young man of two or three and twenty, came forward and bent his knee for the king's blessing.

"Ha, Edward," said Alfred, embracing him affectionately, "when camest thou hither? And Ethelred also, my brave son, thou art welcome. How does my child, thy little bride?"

"Right well, lord and father," said the elder of the two, a mighty warrior whom Alfgar looked upon with reverence as the king's most faithful ally, the ealdorman of the Mercians and husband of Alfred's eldest

daughter. "She commends her to thee, and rules more wisely than I while I take the field."

"And what brings ye both hither?" demanded Alfred; "no evil tidings?"

"What but the treachery of East Anglia," said the young Atheling. "The tidings came to me in Berkshire that they had broken faith again, and as I hurried eastward to see what was doing I encountered my brother here, with his men of London, ready to chastise their broken promises."

"Ye are come in a good hour, my sons," said the king, "so may ye well keep them in check with such folks as London and the country here can raise, if our army be summoned hence. But ye are all tarrying for me, and we must call our friends to council. Edward, here is the son of my good friend, Bernulf, Thegn of Brockstede, ready to be friend and brother-in-arms to thee as his father was to thy father."

The young Atheling greeted Alfgar warmly, both with hand and lips, after the fashion of the times, while the boy glowed with pleasure at being received on equal terms by a prince already so famous in arms. Edward had heard something of his adventures, and asked eager questions as they followed the king and Ethelred back to the house. Breakfast was spread in the hall, and was eaten hastily, with much talk at the upper table, where the king and his chief advisers sat, as to the course to be pursued for guarding the counties most open to invasion. Alfred, who knew well the rapid mobility of his enemy, was strongly of opinion that the inhabitants of Hertfordshire and Essex should be able, by careful organization of their own fighting strength, with such help as Ethelred

could afford them from the now important city of London, to defend their borders against their faithless and turbulent neighbours, leaving him free to follow, with what we should now describe as a flying column, the unexpected dashes of the invading army. By such strategy he did indeed intercept them a few weeks later with perfect success at Farnham in Surrey, opposing and defeating their ravaging army, while his stationary forces fell upon the camp they had left and seized prisoners and stores. The neighbouring land-owners were proud and eager to justify the king's confidence in them, vowing that they had little right to the lands they held if they could not keep them from East Anglian aggression and treachery.

"And what that treachery is," said Alfred, "we learn afresh from our young host, who has suffered, as many of us have done before him, by over-trust in East Anglian good faith."

"In this matter we suffer together, my lord," said Sexwulf of Hartington, who had just arrived; "and we can scarce blame so young a man of the world as our thegn here for crediting promises that have deceived his elders. I stand here disgraced that it was from my hall that Sweyne, the earl, rode, all unknown to me, to join his rebel kindred; indeed, so far was I misled, that I had pledged my only daughter's hand to the traitor who sought my young neighbour's life."

"A dear pledge to give, unless the trust were very deeply founded, Thegn Sexwulf," said Alfred gravely.

"Dear, indeed, my lord, but I grudged it not, since the Dane had sworn by every holy oath a man can

speak, that it should be the strengthening for ever of the ties which bound him to keep peace in this land. But the wariest among us may be deceived, and I were the more shamefaced were it not that even the wisest in our land has seen his own godson in arms against him."

"True, thegn," answered Alfred quietly, and without heeding the covert sarcasm, "and I wot well that many doubted the strength of our bond with Guthrum. Yet, I doubt whether we had bound him better by the shedding of more blood than by bringing him and his to the waters of baptism. At least we may see the children the faithful subjects of the Heavenly King if their father never fully submitted him to an earthly one."

"The thought is worthy of the mind that devised it," said Sexwulf courteously.

"And, moreover, runs no risk to the heart or the life of a maiden," said Ethelred the ealdorman, under his breath.

At this moment a confusion of cries and shouting without interrupted the conversation. The warriors were on their feet in a moment, with the promptitude of men living in constant expectation of alarm, but the king was the first to exclaim—

"This is no attack; 'tis more like a brawl among the village folk."

At the same moment, Eadgyth, with white, dismayed face, rushed in, and threw herself before him.

"Oh, lord king," she cried, "spare him! speak for him; in very sooth he is no wizard and no traitor."

"Fear not, dear maid," said Alfred, raising her; "no

ill shall be done. What is amiss? For whom pleadest thou?"

But, while he spoke, Sexwulf had passed rapidly from among the other thegns and stepped out of the hall and down to the gatehouse, where a shouting crowd had gathered. He caught sight of one of his own men on the bridge, and turned upon him savagely.

"Fool, why didst thou not my bidding?" he said between his teeth.

"I had done it quickly enough, my lord," was the sulky answer, "but for him yonder, who must needs take our work out of our hands, with talk of king's justice, and bring the prisoner hither to have his word whether the doom were right."

Sexwulf's brow grew black as night.

"Fools that ye are!" he said between his teeth. "What is your work save to see my dooms performed? Am I sheriff for nought, that I cannot find the guilt of a wizard and a traitor without seeking to the king's justice? The good folks here know——"

He broke off abruptly as the shouting crowd stood back to make way for the king, who came forth, stately and quiet, with Eadgyth's tearful face upturned to him.

"He is a Scot, my lord," she was saying, "a great scholar from over seas, and holds the Christian Faith most purely indeed; and it is only that he hath such gifts of song and such knowledge of the healing art that they say he is a warlock. And I know well that he never, never brought the Danes upon us. He was our guest, and good friend to us all."

"Fear nothing, lady; all justice he shall have," replied Alfred. "Where is he?"

"They hold him at the meeting tree, my lord," answered one of the bystanders. "Wilfrid guards him from the folk who are ready to tear him."

"This is no matter to stay the king," said one of the other thegns. "We have no noble here, I trow, who must needs be judged by none of less degree. He may well abide the doom of the folk without calling my lord from what concerns the whole land."

"It concerns the whole land that justice be done to the poorest within it," said Alfred. "Bring me to the prisoner, and let us know what has passed."

A few minutes brought them to a rising ground beside the church, in the midst of which grew a mighty beech tree, visible from some distance round. Beneath its spreading boughs the "tun-moot," or village council, was wont to meet, there to decide such simple matters as could be settled without appeal to a higher tribunal. Here every free man had a right to say his say on matters of local interest, and from here accredited representatives went to speak for themselves and their neighbours at the larger council of the "hundred moot." From thence the appeal was to the "folk moot," the gathering in arms of the whole country side, and the growing power of the "king's justice" made a final refuge for those condemned by their fellows to fine, outlawry, or death. The crowd of villagers surged and swayed round the tree, a large proportion of them being women and children, who shook their fists with impotent anger at the prisoner. He stood leaning against the trunk, surveying them with a nonchalant

air, which contrasted strangely with his tattered clothes and bound hands, and the marks left on his face by stones and mud which had been flung at him. Before him stood Wilfrid, his foot set firm and his drawn sword in his hand, while two or three of the house servants kept the crowd back with their thick staves, looking at the same time a little doubtful as to how far the prisoner deserved their protection. Conan was speaking as the king and his thegns approached.

"My good friend, Wilfrid," he said, "thou hadst best save thy labour. Beware lest the mud that belongs to me by rights bespatter thee too. It were a better fate than I could look for, to die for being held wiser than other folks."

"If thou hast no care for thine own life," said Wilfrid, almost sternly, "thou mightest have some for those who will sorrow for thy death."

"The wounds made by my death will very speedily be whole," said the Irishman lightly.

"Thou knowest better," said Wilfrid briefly, looking down upon the group ascending the hill.

Conan followed his gaze, and a sudden light came into his eyes as he saw Eadgyth, pressing before the king. It was she, indeed, who sprang first to his side, looking up at him with frank, distressed face.

"Alack! alack! that this should have befallen here," she said earnestly; "believe me, I grieve for it, and so will my mother. But all will be well now the king is come. He will understand. Ah, have they hurt thee? Shame, shame on them! And the cord is cutting thy hands. Wilfrid, quick—thy dagger."

"Stand back—stand back, Lady Eadgyth!" cried a

woman in the crowd. "He has evil powers at his command; he may do thee a mischief. Here is Ingwald, who swears he has demons at his service."

"He makes the dead live with his arts," cried another. "Frigyth saw it with her own eyes."

Eadgyth faced round upon them, glowing with indignation.

"Frigyth had best have a care and speak sooth. I know all that she does. Would ye slay every one who has more skill than yourselves to aid his fellow men?"

"The king speaks, Lady Eadgyth," said Wilfrid softly, beside her.

Alfred had taken his place upon a turf-seat under the tree, and was asking rapid questions, first bidding some one cut the bonds, which were knotted with cruel tightness about the prisoner's wrists. Sexwulf, who had his feelings at least under outward control by this time, told his story fluently enough. The man had been dragged before him as he rode to Brockstede in the early dawn to meet the king. There had seemed to him to be overwhelming evidence that the fellow had dealings with the powers of evil. Several of the villagers testified to the miraculous cures he had wrought.

"The same is said of the saints of our holy Church," said Alfred quietly.

The thegn assented readily, but added that that was but a small part of the evidence. There were those who could declare that the charms the stranger sang to his harp deprived his hearers of their wits. His own daughter, when seated in the hall at Brockstede, had been seen to fall into strange excitement

and distress at the sound of his music. Hildyth, the young waiting-maid, being pushed forward by some one, faltered, in much confusion at having to speak to the king, that it was all sooth, the lady Eadgyth herself knew how her guest had wept at the music, and had since desired to devote herself to the service of Heaven.

"Was that the work of evil charms?" asked the king, while the accusers looked rather discomforted by such ingenuous evidence, and he went on to ask what was the nature of the songs.

"There were some battle songs," Hildyth said, "that made all the young men long to fight, though they were in a strange tongue; but what the lady Ostritha wept over was the 'Dream of the Holy Rood.'"

"Then if the shedding of tears at such words as those be a sign of witchcraft, I have been bewitched many a time," said Alfred smiling.

Sexwulf agreed readily.

Had the maiden told him this sooner he had not judged as he did. Yet there were other things to be answered. The old dame could tell of strange doings in the hut where the stranger had wrought his marvellous cure. But here Wilfrid and Eadgyth interposed with evidence which made short work of old Frigyth's marvels.

"And to his goodness we owe my brother's life, as well as the sick Dane's," Eadgyth ended softly, looking at Conan with her beaming, grateful eyes.

"Yet, perchance, lady," said Sexwulf meaningly, "the saving of the pagan was the greater matter to the prisoner, for though our king in his wisdom has

cleared him of dealings with the Evil One, we have yet to learn what passed between him and his Danish patient, before both vanished after so sudden a fashion."

"And that we must needs ask of himself," said Alfred, turning courteously to the Irishman.

Conan laughed, a light joyous laugh, coming strangely into the evidence of a man on trial for his life.

"I fear, my lord," he said, "that our talk had little to do with the country's weal, though of much import to ourselves. The stranger asked me how they called the maiden who had tended him, and to whom she spoke when she knelt beside him. And I answered him as best I might, and must pray the lady to forgive that her name thus passed between us."

"And thou knowest not whither he went?" asked Alfred.

"I knew not then, my lord. I followed him that I might find out, having little doubt that there were others of his countrymen not far away, and with evil work on hand."

"Thou thinkest not that he came from East Anglia?"

"Assuredly not, my lord, though the East Anglians were strengthening the hands of his kindred, and they were doubtless waiting for their aid to attack. He had trodden the deck of a pirate ship not many weeks before, and was doubtless one of a foraging party, who left him at the hut when he fell ill of the sickness which has done such scathe in this land of late. I tracked them through the woods, and saw them meet a larger band, and so hastened back hither to give the warning."

"A warning which came over-late," said Sexwulf dryly.

"By word of mouth, yes, my noble thegn, seeing that the pagans were horsed, and I had but mine own two feet, and not even the wings of an evil spirit to carry me. But, seeing I was like to be outstripped, I betook me to the hill yonder, and there kindled a blaze to carry my message."

"Was it thou who fired the beacon?" asked a chorus of voices.

"Even my unworthy self," answered Conan coolly, "and with no mightier magic than flint and steel to aid me."

"Yet wert thou seemingly content we should conquer without the aid of thy sword," said Sexwulf.

"I was forced to be so, noble thegn, by the ready zeal of thy folk, who seized me as I came from the beacon hill, and, for some trick of my tongue, which frames not your words as those do who are born here, would have it I was a Danish scout, and kept me safely in ward out of harm's way. I am beholden to them for my safety from Northern axes, and to my friend, Wilfrid, for my escape from the fate of a wizard, which they had instead prepared for me."

"And we, sir," said King Alfred rising, "must needs ask pardon of one to whom, seemingly, we owe our safety. Thegn Sexwulf, what sayest thou?"

"That I ask the stranger's forgiveness, my lord," said the thegn, "and beseech yourself to remember that, if I doomed hastily, it was that I deemed the weal of England called me to your side without delay."

"The weal of England was never yet served by

an unjust doom," said Alfred gravely; "they who have not the time to hear truth and do justice had best leave dealing with the laws of our land." *

The rebuke was spoken in low tones, so as to be heard by the thegn alone, and with a grave severity which had nothing in it of rancour or impatience; and Alfred turned away at once to make courteous inquiries of Conan, and, with the young Irishman beside him, he led the way back to the hall.

* "He inquired into almost all the judgments that were given in his absence. If he perceived there was inequity in these judgments he summoned the judges, and asked them mildly why they judged so unjustly" (Asser's "Life of Alfred").

CHAPTER XI

On the Watch

"One friend in that path shall be,
To secure my step from wrong;
One to count night day for me,
Patient, through the watches long,
Serving most with none to see."

BROWNING.

HOWEVER ready King Alfred might be to give full time and pains to determine the justice of a cause, he was not the man to let the grass grow under his feet unnecessarily. In an hour's time after he had acquitted and liberated Conan, his arrangements were made, plans concerted for the defence of the neighbourhood by the fighting strength of the locality, and the horses were saddled for the king's return to his own camp. Yet he found time meanwhile to hear Conan's story, and to make graceful amends to him for the wrong he had suffered. The king, who set aside the sixth part of his income for the maintenance of foreigners at his court, felt the treatment the Irishman had received as a

personal disgrace. He pressed Conan courteously to accompany him, adding, with his keen interest in the life and work outside his own nation, that he must hear him speak of the land across the western water, and must profit by the scholarship for which Erin was so famous. Possibly he felt also that the country folks might need a little time to forget the report of the stranger's mysterious powers, and that even their gratitude for the lighting of the beacon might not be proof against their dread of witchcraft. Conan answered gaily that he was hardly fit at present for royal company, and, indeed, few people could have been so graceful and unconcerned as he was in his tattered garments, bespattered from head to foot with mud, and weak with hunger and thirst. Alfgar carried him off to eat and drink and change his clothes, while he himself made his hasty preparations for accompanying the king, and Alfred found opportunity, in spite of all the demands on his attention, to summon Wilfrid to his side, and walk apart with him for a few moments.

"Thinkest thou," he asked in an undertone, "that the Danish earl seized the young lord's person by his own device? Had he been as well content with another prisoner?"

"I think not that he acted from his own device, my lord," said Wilfrid, with equal directness.

"Say on," said the king quietly.

"The thegn Sexwulf has all to gain by the loss of Bernulf's heir, my lord."

"It is true; and for that do I take the lad hence for the present," said the king, "until we know his

neighbour's will the better. Dost think Sexwulf guessed aught of the ill faith of East Anglia and kept the matter secret?"

"I do not know, my lord; I am still uncertain, yet I trust him not."

"Thou speakest mine own fear; yet must I have better proof ere I turn a doubtful friend into an open foe."

"Methinks Hartington might still have stood sure even had Brockstede fallen by the Danish bands, my lord," said Wilfrid rather grimly.

"Well, let it be thy part to watch," said the king. "All may be well: I know not; and woe to me it I withhold my trust where it should be due. Sexwulf is powerful, and has a strong following and much knowledge of the country: but say nought to any, and do thou watch, as I wot well thou canst."

"I will do all that in me lies, my lord," said the young man earnestly.

"I trow thou wilt; and for that reason, and no other, do I not give thee yet such meed as thy courage has well earned. A landed thegn thou shalt be yet, but for now——"

"For now, my lord, I would not be such for all your goodness. My lord, to whom I owe all that I am, bade me guard his treasures, and until there be another more fit than I to take my place, here will I bide. In time to come a wiser brain than mine may think for them, but that must be as it may."

"Methinks it would be hard to seek a better guardian," said the king, with his radiant smile.

A few minutes later the cavalcade rode away, the whole household gathering at the door to watch them start. Alfgar knelt to ask his mother's blessing, and, as he rose to his feet, Conan did the same.

"The Lord in Heaven bless thee, my friend," said the lady Edburga, "and reward thee for the deliverance thou hast brought to our home and our folk."

"To the home and the folk that made me welcome, lady," said the young man, "and brought back to a wanderer on the face of the earth the memory of his mother's prayers."

"Doubt not that thy name will be ever in ours," said Edburga as Conan turned to bid good-bye to Eadgyth.

"Surely it will," said the girl frankly; "and thou wilt come to us again when the king can spare thee."

"If such a bird of passage may find a resting-place among you, lady, I will come," said the Irishman; and, with harp upon his shoulder, he mounted the steed with which Alfgar had provided him, and rode away.

The next to take leave was the thegn Sexwulf, who was riding to his own home to see to its defences before joining the king's forces. Edburga would have found it hard to part from him on friendly terms but for her desire to help his daughter. For Ostritha's sake she brought herself to ask tenderly after the girl, and to repeat her earnest entreaty that she might be allowed to come to Brockstede. To her surprise, her offer was accepted.

"I had not ventured to make the request, lady," the thegn said, "seeing that thou hadst already proved thy wisdom in the matter to be so far above mine own. I placed my trust where methought it was well founded, and sought to bind the Danish earl yet more firmly to our king's cause. But he has played us false, and I can but rejoice that my unfortunate child was not in his keeping. If during mine absence at the king's side I may entrust her to you, who counselled so much more wisely for her welfare, I shall judge myself happy."

Edburga rejoiced heartily at the permission to fulfil her promise to the girl's mother, but Eadgyth, though delighted at the idea of welcoming Ostritha, could by no means forgive or believe in her father.

"He cares not where she goes, that is the truth of it," she said to Wilfrid; "and 'tis well my mother spoke for her, or she might have had a worse fate. Sexwulf had wedded her very like to one no better than the Dane."

"Nay, that could he not," said Wilfrid. "Didst not hear the king ask Sexwulf of his daughter's age?"

"Nay, not I. She was sixteen years on the festival of our Lord's birth. What of that?"

"Why, if that be so, her father has no right to wed her against her will. 'Tis so seldom that a maid of that age has a will in the matter that I had well-nigh forgotten it; but so stands the law, and our king will see it kept if the maiden's friends cry to him for it."

"Then she is safe," said Eadgyth, "and I shall

maybe, pardon her father so he can do her no harm, and since thou didst save Conan from him. Ah, Wilfrid, that was a good deed of thine!"

"Thou didst thyself speak to the king for his life," said Wilfrid smiling.

"What would that have availed if thou hadst not stood before him with thy sword when the people were like to tear him in pieces? Ah, if our own folk had slain him—he who warned us all by the kindling of the beacon! Art thou not happy, Wilfrid, that thou couldst save him?"

"Ay, I am glad to have saved so great a shame," he answered, smiling down on her, "and glad to have spared thee so sore a grief, Lady Eadgyth."

The next day a party of Sexwulf's men brought their young mistress and her maid, Elgiva, to Brockstede, with messages of courteous commendation and thanks from the thegn, who would have escorted his daughter himself, but for a hasty summons to the king's headquarters.

It was good to see Ostritha fling herself into the arms of her hostess and of Eadgyth.

"Never did I dream I should return to you so soon," she cried, as she clung to Edburga. "Ah, how I prayed that I might die, and be with my own mother, if I could not come hither!"

"God heard thy prayer, then, my child," said Edburga, embracing her fondly, "and sent thee to the one to whom thy mother commended thee. Mine own dear child shalt thou be, so long as thy father will spare thee to us."

"That is like to be for long enough," Ostritha said, with much satisfaction.

Many a time during the year that followed did Edburga look back to that March evening when she had brought Wynflaed and her infant home to the roof which was so soon to be no shelter for any of them. The old danger was back again, the fear that had overshadowed her youth and had slept now for many long years. Men and women lived, as before, a life of constant watching; news came of raids in one place and another, of new promises from East Anglia, and of treaties broken by the Danes whenever the opportunity presented itself. Yet there was none of the old panic of Edburga's young days, no more talk of abandoning the land to the invaders. Alfred had not only won England back for the English, he had taught them how to keep it. His army was no longer the irregular levy of men who might disperse at any moment and return to the tilling of their fields. "Half the king's force," says the chronicle, "was constantly at home, the other half in the field, besides those men whose duty it was to defend the towns." Alfred, with the main body of his troops, watched the Danish camps with the unceasing vigilance of a dog before a rat-hole, ready to pounce upon them at the first movement or attempt to replenish their stores from the neighbouring farms and homesteads. If a band of the Northmen got past him, either from Kent or from Essex, his forces would be instantly on their heels, while another detachment fell upon the unguarded camp. Twice that year did the women and stores of his enemies fall into the king's hands, to be restored to them after solemn promises of submission, which were broken almost as soon as made. Twice did Hasting and his army dash across the whole breadth of the

land, only to be followed up and blockaded by the indefatigable king in their camps near Chester. And meanwhile the burghers of London and the men of Kent, Hertfordshire, and Essex watched East Anglia and the Danish camps on the coast, as men watch who have their dearest treasures at stake, tilling their fields and gathering their crops as the builders of Jerusalem worked of old, with one hand holding a weapon.

And, in this life of daily anxiety and insecurity, Eadgyth and Ostritha grew into womanhood together. It seemed to Edburga, as she watched them, that some mysterious bond between the two girls must have come into being while they lay in the same cradle; for, new as their friendship was, no two sisters could have been more to each other. Both by nature and education they were absolutely unlike. Eadgyth, bred up in a well-ordered and loving home, was a happy-tempered, simple-minded maiden, with the practical vein which would make her a good housewife, and the clear brain and sober judgment which characterized many of her countrywomen, and made them, not seldom, the counsellors of bishops and kings. Ostritha had the imaginative enthusiastic temper of her Keltic kindred, something, too, of their involuntary melancholy and love of the mysterious. She had, besides, that craving after knowledge and quick aptitude for learning that had made Keltic Ireland the home of great scholars. The want of sight had certainly quickened her other faculties, and she astonished Eadgyth every day by her extraordinary memory, her quick apprehension and wonderful sense of touch. She found her way at once about the house

and the farm buildings, learnt psalm and poem from Eadgyth at a rate which amazed her young teacher, and already made the harp-strings answer to her touch as if her passionate love of music gave her an understanding with them.

Elgiva, the waiting-maid, grumbled good-humouredly that her young mistress was grown far too wise for her to meddle with; adding, however, that if she were to grow like the lady of Brockstede she would be well content to wash platters for her all her life. For Edburga had conquered Ostritha's maid, as she did most people with whom she had to do. The girl was not bad-hearted, only somewhat free of tongue and masterful, as was likely enough in Sexwulf's ill-ordered household, where so little respect was demanded for the thegn's daughter. Under Edburga's wise rule she chafed exceedingly at first, fought endless wordy battles with Hildyth and the other maidens, and turned the heads of not a few of the young men, notwithstanding the fact that she was already betrothed to Sexwulf's huntsman. But there came a day when a man from Hartington brought the tidings that Guthlac the huntsman had been wounded to death by the tusk of a wild boar in the wood, and had sent the brooch from his shoulder and his favourite hawk to the maiden he had looked to wed. Edburga found the girl sobbing in passionate undisciplined grief; and took her to her heart, with her tender understanding of sorrow, and comforted her as she best knew how. And from that day Elgiva was the lady's devoted servant, even though she decided after a while to live in the world still, and even discovered that Werefrith, the cup-bearer at Brockstede,

was a goodly and personable youth, who would make a satisfactory bridegroom for a maiden who could not spend all her life wailing a lost lover. But she nevertheless upheld Edburga's authority to every one, took rebuke from her without a murmur, and constantly assured Ostritha that to copy the blessed lady of Brockstede was as good any day as imitating the saints.

As to Ostritha's own future, she and Eadgyth talked it over, in girl fashion, many a time that summer and autumn. By the Saxon law, which protected jealously the rights of the women to whom the nation gave so honoured a place, Ostritha, at sixteen, was free, if she liked, to enter a convent.

"Yet I know not," she would sigh; "they might not want me there—I who have no eyes to read and work like the other sisters. I shall ever need some one patient, like my friends here, to guide me. If thy mother were the abbess, Eadgyth, then how gladly would I be a sister under her rule!"

"Then bide in the world," said Eadgyth, "and wed a brave thegn, and rule his house wisely and well while he fights the pagans. There were noble work for thee."

"Methinks that calls for as much wisdom and holiness as the life in the cloister," said Ostritha.

"So spoke the king to me," said Eadgyth, "that in the hands of the wives and mothers of our land lay England's future. My father ever said he owed to my mother all the greatness of his life, in that she sent him to join the king at Athelney. And

only think of our king's daughter, the great lady of the Mercians, has she not her father's own heart and mind? I myself heard the ealdorman say she was a wiser ruler than himself, and he counted her not only as his right hand but his head also."

"It is a very great thing to be an Englishwoman," said Ostritha slowly, "since Heaven calleth them to such great things. As for thee," she added, half-laughing, "methinks thou art to be a missionary, my Eadgyth, and preach the Faith to the pagans. Yonder Dane, with the stolen cross about his neck, will come yet to baptism with thee for godmother. Dost ever think of him?"

"Every day in my prayers," said Eadgyth simply: "he saved Alfgar's life, and he desired sorely to know the truth; I think he will yet come to it."

So the girls talked, by the hall fire or in the garden, where the bees, who made honey for the household mead, hummed over the fragrant herbs. Eadgyth chafed a little now and then with pretended vexation because Wilfrid set so many restraints upon their wanderings, and would hardly let them out of sight of the house. He was afraid, she told him, of another long night's ride with a member of the family before him on the saddle. And Wilfrid smiled his quiet smile, and never relaxed his vigilance. But indeed all England was on guard that year, with the tireless foe ever re-enforced from restless East Anglia or from their comrades on the sea, dashing from east to west, now plundering, now flying, ever with some fresh trick or stratagem. While ever on their tracks came

the man whose mighty heart was as the heart of England itself, beating always strong and hopeful and undaunted, keeping the land he loved alive and steadfast, true to her great destiny among the nations of the earth.

CHAPTER XII

The Assault of the Men of London

"My father's spirit in arms! All is not well.
I doubt some foul play."

Hamlet (Act I, Sc. ii.).

TWO years and more had passed since Alfgar of Brockstede rode away in King Alfred's train, and one sunny afternoon in early summer he was riding again along the broad road between the green woods and meadows. Two years had done much for Alfgar: he was growing out of boyhood early, as men did in those troublous days. He had increased both in height and breadth of shoulder, giving promise of rivalling his father's fine stature and strength; and he wore the mail and carried the sword and dagger of a warrior. More than that, he had left behind him much of his boyish petulance and wilfulness. The sharp lesson of Sweyne's treachery and of his own danger and remorse had taught him much, and more mighty still had been the great ideal which, from that day, he had set before him. The king, with his indomitable courage and resource, his steady disregard of difficulty and

disappointment and personal suffering, his grand humility and sunny loving nature, had taken the boy's heart entirely by storm. On the rare occasions when he had seen him, during the last two years, Alfred had always found time to take special notice of his old friend's son, and to inquire after his progress in his studies; and Alfgar worked eagerly for his approbation, and was more than rewarded by the king's kindly, ready praise. And now, though, as his royal friend told him, he must go on learning all his life, his actual school-days were over, and he was going home, to take his part in what was every man's work, the defence of his country against foreign force and home treachery. A band of his own men had ridden to meet him, and of them he asked a thousand questions as to what was doing, questions to which the replies were not very satisfactory. Indeed, Alfgar noted himself, with bitter indignation, many a trace of Danish raiding, in burnt farms and plundered stack-yards.

"Ay," said one of his companions, "'tis an evil thing to see, and worse to have Danish long-ships in the Lea and a Danish fort above the river at Hertford. It means watch and ward day and night to keep house and home from their hands; and whether they or we will reap this year's harvest, soothly 'tis hard to say."

"By what mishap were they ever left to sit down thus among us?" exclaimed Alfgar.

"Who can say? They were too swift for us, that is all. None keeps pace with them save the king, whose wit is quicker even than theirs. And he would have us learn——"

The man broke off as the sound of horse-hoofs were heard behind them, and a young man from the neighbourhood, who had been Alfgar's playfellow in their younger days, came spurring along the road, and greeted him warmly.

"Ha, Alfgar of Brockstede, welcome home again! Thou comest truly in a good hour. Wilt lead thy men thyself in the brave work to-morrow?"

"What work is doing?" asked Alfgar eagerly.

"What but the saving of our honour in ridding us of yonder pestilent fort. Here are the men of London and the ealdorman of Essex come to aid us in driving the pagans to their boats again. 'Tis a crying shame that we abide them sitting above us there, and raiding our farms and fields."

"Where is the ealdorman?" asked Alfgar.

"At the house of Sexwulf of Hartington, where I myself am bidden to sup; thou wilt find thine own hall full too, and the cooks busy. By sunset to-morrow we will send the king word that we have cleared the place of the pagans, and are worthy to welcome him when he chooses to visit us. But here must I leave thee, Alfgar, and doubtless thou art fain to be at home. Farewell, till the hour before dawn to-morrow, and we will set a match who will be first over the pagans' walls." And he rode off, with a gay wave of his hand.

As he had said, Alfgar reached home to find a great bustle of preparation going forward. Eadgyth stood at the gatehouse, bargaining with a man who had brought a basket of fish for sale, and so absorbed in her purchases, that it was Ostritha, standing beside her, who first exclaimed—

"There is the tread of a strange horse," and made her turn to find her brother in sight.

"Welcome, welcome, Alfgar!" she cried, flying into his arms. "Ah, it is good to see thee, thy very own self! Only thou lookest over my head, thou hast left my little brother behind thee. Here is Ostritha waiting to greet thee. And now come, come to our mother; she is talking with the guests."

And she hurried him across the bridge, though he was detained at every step by house servants, eager to bid the young master welcome home. The lady Edburga had already heard the sounds of the arrival, and was hurrying to the door; and the young warrior threw himself, clanking mail, winged helmet and all, into her arms.

"Is he not grown a mighty man, mother?" cried Eadgyth, as Edburga put her son from her, and looked at him with fond, inquiring eyes.

"Thou art even as thy father was when I saw him first, mine Alfgar," she said, smiling proudly through the tears which dimmed the fair vision in the shining arms.

"They who knew him have told me that," said the boy softly. "Pray Heaven it be not only in height and breadth, sweetest mother. But where is Wilfrid?"

"Gone forth to see that all be ready for the attack on the pagans to-morrow; he will be here anon. But thou must needs be weary and hungry, my son, and here is many a stout friend for thee to greet."

And, leaning proudly on her son's arm, Edburga drew him with her into the hall, where, as she had said, a goodly company was already gathered.

Alfgar was warmly greeted by his father's friends, and many a kindly speech brought the tears to Edburga's eyes, as the assembled thegns remarked on the lad's likeness to Bernulf, and predicted for him such a future as became his father's son.

"He comes in a good hour to his own," said one of the guests, "and I trow will not be the last in the pagan's fort to-morrow."

Supper was served by this time, and the assembled company fell to with a will, for the summer night would be but short, and the hour before dawn was appointed for the attack. Alfgar was eager to hear details of the scheme, and was told that the expedition had been so carefully concerted that it was bound to succeed. The force was to assemble from different directions and make a combined attack an hour before dawn. A weak point in the enemy's defences would be easily carried by assault, and they were expecting now the return of a scout, who would bring certain intelligence of the places at which sentinels were posted. In the midst of the discussion Alfgar heard a step behind him, and looked up to see Wilfrid by his chair.

"Wilfrid," he cried, springing up, and seizing his hands as eagerly as in the old days when the freeman had been his kindest playfellow, "where hast thou been all this time? 'Twas not home without thee to greet me."

"'Tis home again now thou art in thy place," said Wilfrid, looking at the boy with as much loving pride as if he had been a son of his own.

"We all need thy counsel, Wilfrid," said one of the thegns. "None know the country as thou dost, and

we are here in debate as to whether we may indeed hope to cut the pagans off from their boats."

Wilfrid took his place at the table and joined in the discussion. It was true that no one could compete with him in accurate knowledge of the country and of all its possibilities for attack and defence; and Alfgar discovered that he was at variance with the rest of the warriors as to the point on which the Danish fort should be assaulted. He yielded, indeed, to the majority against him, but it was clear that their arguments did not convince him. The summer twilight had darkened into night. Many of the men who were to fight on the morrow had thrown themselves down already on the rush-strewn floor for a few hours' sleep, and Alfgar's own eyelids were growing heavy, when a stir at the door announced the return of the scout. He was a huntsman famous for his knowledge of wood and river, and for reckless courage in the pursuit of such dangerous game as was to be found in the dense forests. Yet he came in looking scared and uneasy, with wide, restless eyes, and cheeks pale in the torch-lighted hall. As he came up to the table at which the thegns sat, he gave a sudden cry, and stood, with knees knocking together, staring at Alfgar as he sat in his father's place.

"Here too, here too, Thegn Bernulf?" he cried shrilly. "Have mercy on me; a man must live."

"Knowest thou me not, Bertric?" said the lad. "I am Alfgar, son of Bernulf; what is there to fear?"

"Alfgar, son of Bernulf," said the man slowly, and as if with a breath of relief; "then thou didst walk by the river an hour since in the twilight."

"Not I," said Alfgar. "I have never left the hall since I came hither, three hours before sundown."

"Thy double, then, I saw on the river-bank below the Danish fort," said the man doggedly, "and held it for the spirit of the thegn who died three years agone."

"And fled before it, I trow," said one of the thegns contemptuously, "leaving us to find our own ford."

"Not so, sir," was the sulky answer; "my work was done or ever I saw the armed figure on the bank. And, for fleeing before it, I will face any warrior that ever wielded sword, but spirits of air are no foes for a brave man."

"Many a man sees strange things in the gloaming," said another thegn, smiling.

"And he who is doing no ill need fear neither flesh nor spirit," said Wilfrid, speaking suddenly for the first time.

"I fear nothing, Wilfrid, son of Anlaf," said Bertric rather sullenly, "and I trow thou hadst found it strange to meet thy master, the thegn, in his war gear as of old; for such doubtless the vision was, seeing he stood, as I may guess, a matter of a hand's-breadth above the young thegn here, and broader in the shoulders to boot."

"Then, if the good thegn's spirit can walk this earth again," said Father Wulfstan, "he comes for no ill purpose, but even to bring a blessing on our arms to-morrow, and we may well rejoice that his good-will and his prayers are with us. And, worthy thegns and freemen, ye would do well to question this man of the news he brings you, and then take what rest

ye can to fit you for the assault on these enemies of the Lord."

The last plans were accordingly made, and the warriors lay down as they were about the hearth, to snatch an hour of soldiers' sleep. Many of them were astir soon after midnight, and gathering in the little church where Father Wulfstan was offering prayers for the success of the day's venture. The two maidens knelt beside the lady Edburga on the stone floor, and the dim lights burning before the altar glinted on Eadgyth's bright bowed head, and on the mail of the kneeling warriors. The men's faces were bright and confident, as they rose and came out into the cool scented darkness of the summer night, and looked eastward, where no hint of the coming dawn was yet visible, though already a bird chirped and twittered here and there among the leaves. Eadgyth, lingering in the porch, caught Wilfrid's arm as he passed her.

"Wilfrid," she whispered anxiously, "thou hopest well?"

"Ay, wherefore not?" he answered cheerfully.

"I watched thy face last night," she went on, "and I thought thou wast not satisfied. Thou dost not fear mishap, Wilfred?"

"It is ill boasting before the battle," he answered. "Yet I trust all will be well; the thegns are all great in hope. Nay, Lady Eadgyth," as her eyes still looked unsatisfied, "thou must not heed my croaking. I have been afoot all night, and a man is apt to fancy many things between the dusk and the dawn."

"Dost thou think," she said under her breath,

"that Bertric saw my father's spirit in very deed?"

"I know not," he answered doubtfully. "If the thegn be thus near us I would I might have speech with him."

"Think'st thou he came, as Father Wulfstan said, to bless our arms before Alfgar's first fight? Or was it for warning, Wilfrid?"

"I cannot guess," he answered gravely.

"Whatever it were, he would rejoice to see us stout of heart," said Eadgyth smiling.

"I know right well thou wilt pray for our success," he answered, smiling back at her; "and therein lies our best hope. Now must we away lest we fail the ealdorman and his band from Hartington."

So in the darkness the men set forth, hopeful of heart, while the women, when their straining eyes could no longer follow them through the shadows, went back to the home to prepare for their return, or to the church to pray for them.

They prayed that day as women pray in war-time, with the sense of their own impotence to help otherwise, which makes such prayers passionate and real. Eadgyth, usually the most hopeful of all, was conscious now of a strange foreboding which kept her half the day upon her knees. She hardly knew herself how much her thoughts were coloured by what Wilfrid thought and said, and that vision of her father, walking by night along the river bank, came back to her again and again. As the hours went on, flying rumours reached the village, first of a successful attack, then, vague but persistent, of failure and repulse. Sickening with suspense and dread, the women

waited, some venturing out along the road or trying to see something from the rising ground, some hastily preparing for flight in case the victorious Danes should appear to sack their homes.

By afternoon came more certain tidings, as fugitives began to arrive. The attack had failed. The Danes had been on the alert. There had been desperate fighting, the men of London and their allies doing all that brave men could to turn the day, but they had been repulsed, and with heavy loss. One well-known name and another was mentioned among the fallen. The lady Edburga, who had waited thus for news many a time before, cheered and held together the panic-stricken women until they well-nigh forgot how great was her own stake in this day's conflict. Ostritha was, as usual, the first to announce, amid the tumult of dismay and weeping, the tread of Wilfrid's horse. Another moment and he was in their midst, saying with his first breath—

"The thegn Alfgar is unwounded, and has done bravely," and then adding that there was little fear of an attack.

"We have failed to surprise them," he said, as Eadgyth hid her face in a rush of relief on her mother's shoulder, "and they have slain many of our folk; but they will not follow us, having felt our sting and knowing we are on our guard."

"Hast any hurt thyself, Wilfrid?" asked the lady affectionately, her eyes thanking him for his first news—for he was stained with dust and blood from spur to helmet.

"Nay, lady, not I. Yet there are many will be needing your tendance; the pagans have mauled

us cruelly. Four king's thegns slain is a sorry sight."

"My father?" asked Ostritha quickly.

"The thegn of Hartington is safe," said Wilfrid, "but even as by a miracle, for the pagans were all about him and like to carry him into the fortress, when some of the London men charged them yet again, and freed him. And now has he ridden homeward in bitterness of spirit, I trow, like the rest."

"What of the ealdorman of Essex?" asked Eadgyth.

"He was by Sexwulf's side when the men of London came between him and the Danes. He has no hurt and lies to-night at Hartington. Our young thegn has sent thither some twenty of our fellows to guard against an attack, since their defences are weaker than ours here."

A bitter disappointment it was indeed to the bright hopes of the evening before. The baffled band came in, in scattered parties, bearing the wounded and the dead, and the women of Brockstede soon had their hands full with the dressing of wounds. Two of the fallen thegns were borne in by their men, on their levelled spears, and laid before the altar of the little church, and good Father Wulfstan moved to and fro on his mission to comfort the dying. Alfgar came at last, battered and weary, with the first shine and gloss gone from his brilliant arms, and only by the most resolute efforts restraining the tears of mortification and disappointment over the disastrous ending to his first fight. Perhaps the recollection of his king's seven years of unsuccessful warfare kept him from abandoning himself to utter

despair of any future good fortune, and equally helpful was the quietness with which Wilfrid took the reverse. He was as little dismayed to-day as he had been elated yesterday, and the younger lads, who had laughed at his croaking the night before, found comfort now in his quiet certainty that, though they had bought their experience at heavy cost, it would make sure the success of the next attempt.

Yet Wilfrid had his own private anxiety, of which he spoke only to one person. After Alfgar, almost too weary to eat, had fallen asleep with only helmet and mail laid aside, and the house was still, save for those who kept guard against possible attack or tended the wounded, Wilfrid went out silently to the church, where Father Wulfstan kept his last watch beside the still forms laid before the altar. The priest's low-voiced chanting of the psalms met him as he came softly in, and as his step sounded on the stone floor the father rose from his knees beside the bier and came to meet him.

"Thou shouldst be at rest, my son," he said reprovingly. "Thou didst sleep but little last night, I wot well, and this has been an evil day for thee and many."

"I must say a thing to yourself first, father," said the young man, in the same low tones. "To one other alone may it be spoken, and, since he is not here, do I seek thee, well knowing that thou wilt hold it secret as the grave."

"Say on, my son," said the priest quietly.

Wilfrid glanced round him as if afraid still of eavesdroppers, but only the dead thegns lay, calm and solemn in their armour, before the altar.

"Father," he went on, "it is an ill thing that we have failed thus to-day."

"True, my son," said Father Wulfstan, a little surprised; "yet a mishap should be no strange thing to us. I remember too many failures in the past to be over-much cast down by one defeat."

"Ay, if it be a defeat in fair fight," said Wilfrid quickly, "the loss may speedily be redeemed; but if there were treachery at work, father, there is more to reckon with."

"Thinkest thou thus?" asked the priest gravely.

"I misdoubt it, father. I may well be wrong, yet is the fear strong upon me. The pagans were ware of our assault this morning. 'Twas not merely that they kept good watch, but the point where we attacked had double guard, and they bided our coming close that the slaughter might be the greater."

"By whose counsel was the point chosen?" asked the priest.

"By the counsel of Bertric the woodman. Dost thou remember, father, the words he spoke in the hall yesternight?"

"He came in afeared, and spoke of having seen the spirit of the thegn Bernulf."

"He did so, my father, and when he deemed our young thegn to be even one and the same, he cried out for mercy and that a man must live. And marked you the scowl he gave me when I vowed a man with honest purpose feared neither flesh nor spirit?"

"What would it advantage the fellow thus to play false?" said Father Wulfstan doubtfully; "but if

thou doubtest him, let him be so threatened that he will confess the truth."

"That can he not do," said Wilfrid grimly; "he is past the power to do so, father, save to the Judge of all the Earth."

"Fell he in the onslaught? That looks not like treachery."

"He fell, my father, but not in the fighting, unless I be mightily mistaken. I myself found his body when we returned after sundown to seek for some of our wounded folk. It had been thrust into a thicket some way from the place of the fight, and as no Dane would have stayed to do. Nor was he slain by Danish axe or sword, but thrust through with such a spear as our thralls carry. I will take my oath he fell by the hand of those who needed to silence his tongue."

"Dost hold then he was paid to mislead us by one of our own folk?" asked the priest.

"Such is my thought, father, Heaven forgive me if I be wrong. Dost thou remember how, nigh three years since, I spoke to thee of one who had little love for the house of Bernulf?"

"The thegn of Hartington?" exclaimed Wulfstan in horror. "Alack, my son, would he carry his enmity to the undoing of our country?"

"If I be not mistaken he has done thus before now," said Wilfrid slowly. "Sexwulf has a grudge against our king, and he is not one who forgets. Dost thou remember, father, his bond with Sweyne the Dane? Mark me, had Sweyne's comrades sacked Brockstede that night, we had heard more of it."

"Yet has he since done the king good service," said Father Wulfstan.

"He has bided his time, father, and what has passed between him and East Anglia we know not. The king in his wisdom has kept him much with himself, and, moreover, the pagans have been held in check, and Sexwulf is not one to cast in his lot with a losing cause. Could they harry this land from yonder fortress, the face of things would change. Heard you how the men of London took Sexwulf and the ealdorman this morning from their hands? I trow he thanked them little for the service."

Father Wulfstan stood gravely pondering.

"This is an awesome charge, my son," he said at last, "that a Christian Englishman should thus foully betray his land to the pagans. Yet thou art not one to speak without good reason. Didst fear this last night, that thou wentest so soberly into battle?"

"I had fears of a conflict wherein Sexwulf was among the foremost," said Wilfrid, "yet had I then no ground for doubting him, save Bertric's words in the hall. Thinkest thou, father, that the spirit of our thegn, who had reason enough to know his neighbour, might indeed return to warn the fellow of his evil doing?"

"I know not, my son, I know not. Verily there is a God Who judgeth the earth and will bring such foul evil to punishment if indeed it be among us. But, tell me, hast spoken of this to any one?"

"To one only, my father, and that two years agone. To none but thyself have I opened my lips save to him whom it best befitted to know, even Alfred the King."

"Thou didst tell him thy mistrust of Sexwulf's good faith?"

"'Twas he asked me of it, father, and his fears jumped with mine. Yet, after his wise wont, he passed no judgment, only bade me watch, and he has kept the thegn much in his camp since then."

"The ealdorman lies at his house this night," exclaimed Father Wulfstan, in sudden dismay. "Heaven preserve the noble lord if thy thought be true!"

"I have thought of it, father, but there is no fear. My lord Alfgar sent fellows enough of our folk to outnumber Sexwulf's, lest the pagans should break out and strive to take the ealdorman, whom they have especial command to guard."

"A thought of thy thinking, doubtless," said Father Wulfstan, smiling.

"I knew we could trust our fellows," said Wilfrid, "and for better security, father, I go now thither myself."

"Thou must be over wearied, my son, and shouldst be resting. Thou wilt scarce keep thy feet."

"Never fear, father," said the young man smiling. "Those who war with Alfred know how to make one night's sleep serve for three. Only I would have thy counsel in this matter."

"I doubt I can give thee no better rede than thine own, my son," said the priest doubtfully. "Watch we must, and as warily as we may, and methinks the matter should come to the king's ears as soon as may be. We cannot spare thee to bear the tidings, nor dare we trust another messenger, so must I myself become a wanderer from my flock for awhile and

IN THE CHAPEL. p. 209

let him know our fears. With him there is ever counsel, and we may trust him to do for the best."

"That may we," said Wilfrid with brightening face, as if he were laying down a heavy load. "Heaven's blessing on thee for the thought, my father."

"The blessing of the faithful will be upon thee, my son," said the good priest, with his hand on the warrior's head as he bent before him. And, as Wilfrid went noiselessly out into the night and made his rapid way towards Hartington, he turned again to the still forms before the altar, and, with bitter sorrow in his heart, prayed for the deliverance of his country and his people from the treachery which had brought brave men to their death.

CHAPTER XIII

The Hall of Hartington

"The hungry faces merciless . . .
Feasting on me, unveiled in helplessness,
Alone—yet not alone! Lord, stand by me!"
CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

SO the Danes still looked down triumphantly from their fortress upon the meadows and homesteads, and the long-ships still lay in the Lea. The London men had gone back to their work of watching the Thames, lest the Danes in possession should be reinforced from the sea. The Hertfordshire folk watched their departure with sorrow and trepidation, for the harvest was coming on, and there was every likelihood that the Danes, whose stores must need replenishing, would do their best to secure it before its owners. The failure of the assault was the greater disappointment because of the high hopes with which it had been planned. Many a home in the neighbourhood was mourning over the slain, and it might be noted that Wilfrid's

brow would grow dark, and his mouth take a harder set, as he passed by the new mounds in the green burying-ground of the village. Alfgar, whose hopefulness had come back with a night's rest, was soon at work concerting measures for another attack, vowing that it was, after all, a mishap that had occurred, and that a few days' time would see them able to drive out their bad neighbours, even without help from further down the river.

Father Wulfstan, when the last rites for the fallen had been performed, was gone, so the household believed, on one of his visitations to a distant part of his parish.

Edburga and her two daughters, as she fondly called them, had their hands full attending upon the wounded, both in the cottages, where the skill of the ladies was eagerly sought, and among those of the Londoners who had been left behind by their comrades and were lodged in the house itself.

It chanced that one evening a certain herb was required whose virtues were much appreciated as a medicine. Ostritha offered to go with her maid Elgiva and fetch some of it from the wood. Elgiva could lead her along the wood-paths to the place where it grew, and her own quick sense of touch and scent would help her to distinguish the right plant even better than her guide could do. It was a close, heavy evening, with banks of blue-black clouds in the west, as if a thunderstorm might break over the land before morning, and Ostritha, who was keenly sensitive to the changes of weather, walked slowly and in silence, only replying by an occasional smile and

nod to her companion's chatter. Elgiva, whose tongue no depressing influence had ever been able to stop, rambled on about the war, and the harvest, and the prospect of an attack from the Danish stronghold, and the hope that the men of London might yet return to make another attempt.

"For they were fine fellows, some of them; were they not, lady? Swift of hand, I trow, and merry of tongue. There was one of them promised me half his share of the spoil they took in the Danish camp, but alack! poor lad, he never came back. Yet I should have liked a Danish brooch to wear with my holiday kirtle."

"'Twas somewhat too soon to promise gifts ere they were won, Elgiva," said Ostritha, as her handmaiden actually paused for breath.

"That is what Wilfrid would say, lady, that tiresome Wilfrid, who must needs look so solemn when the rest were all gay and gallant, and wanted to go to the attack by some other way than that of all the noble thegns."

"And was, moreover, in the right," said Ostritha, with a sigh. "But, Elgiva, are we not yet where our herb grows? Methinks we have come further than we are wont to do. Beware lest thou miss the right path."

Elgiva laughed at the idea. She had known the wood-path too long to miss the way. They would reach the dell where they were going directly.

"Thou art weary with the heat, lady," she added. "Sit down a moment and I will go on and gather the leaves and come back to thee."

"No, I will go on, since we are so near," said Ostritha, who had not perfect confidence in Elgiva's bringing the right thing if left to herself. They went on accordingly, pushing through the thick underwood. Here, under the boughs heavy with their summer leafage, there seemed hardly air to breathe. Now and then a pigeon rose rustling above their heads, the red coat of a deer showed between the tree-trunks, a rabbit scurried across the track with white tail cocked in the air, or some larger animal stirred in a dark thicket. They were the only sounds that broke the heavy silence: even Elgiva's chatter had ceased. Ostritha stopped at last, putting out her hands to feel the tall growth which brushed her knees.

"Surely," she said, "this is not our path. I knew not that the fern grew thus thick here. There is a good track to the dell we are seeking."

Elgiva, for reply, burst suddenly into tears.

"Oh, Lady Ostritha," she sobbed, "I fear me I have missed the way. Alack, alack! I was talking and I did not note it, and I thought to find it again; but there is no track here at all, and I know not where we are."

"Let us turn back then," said Ostritha. "It must be nigh sundown."

"'Tis dark here already," sobbed Elgiva. "I can see nought under these trees, and the skies are black; there will be a storm. And belike the wolves will fall on us. Oh, lady, lady, forgive me!"

"Hush, Elgiva," said the girl gently; "'twill not avail us to weep over it, and, even if we spend the

night here, many have fared worse. Doubtless God's angels are about us. See now, stop weeping, and use thy wit to find the way back if thou canst, or we may come to some track that will lead us to another village or some woodman's shelter. Give me thy hand and let us go forward."

The firm clasp of her young mistress' fingers quieted Elgiva, and, though she cried and trembled still, she led the way forward through the trees, Ostritha walking beside her with a far steadier step than that of her guide and protector. Of course the darkness which so terrified and bewildered the maid was no new thing to the blind girl, nor could she start and tremble when a vivid flash of lightning parted the clouds and showed everything for an instant in intense blue light. Elgiva shrieked again as the thunder crashed across the sky, but Ostritha's face lit up with a sort of awestruck happiness. Something in her imaginative northern nature responded to the tumult of the storm as the thunder peal rumbled away into the distance and the trees bent low before the rushing wind that comes before the rain.

"Why art thou afraid, Elgiva?" she asked. "One would say thou wert a pagan, and feared the hammer of Thor. That is God's voice telling us His power will protect us. Surely the ground here is more level, and there is nothing across the way. Are we not on a track at last?"

"Ay, that we are," exclaimed Elgiva, after groping for a minute in the shadows; "here is a path cut that leads surely to some dwelling."

They followed it for a few minutes, when the trees

on either hand fell back suddenly and they found themselves on open ground, where such light as there was showed a cluster of cottages and the dark mass of a large building, with its surrounding barns and outhouses. Elgiva gave a cry of delighted recognition.

"Thanks be to Heaven, dear lady, all is well now. 'Tis Hartington, your own home, and where better should we shelter from the night and the storm until we can wend easily back to Brockstede to-morrow? Now I know the path well enough, and we will enter by the little gate, where, I mind me, I have slipped in many a time when I was somewhat late abroad, and be under shelter ere the rain is heavy."

"I fear me they will be frighted for us at Brockstede," said Ostritha.

"We will find a lad to bear news of our safety," said Elgiva consolingly. "Come, dear lady, the rain is falling already."

She was quite her gay, busy self again at the near prospect of escaping the terrors of the dark wood. Ostritha was not so happy. She had been once or twice to her home since her father had confided her to the care of the lady of Brockstede, but she was never easy or contented there. She had too painful recollections of what she had suffered there before to wish to return; and though her father, when he visited her at Brockstede, had spoken kindly to her and remarked upon her improvement under the lady Edburga's teaching, she knew too well that he regarded her as an encumbrance ever to be at ease with him. Besides, the unrestrained ways and free

speech of Hartington jarred upon her after the well-ordered household at Brockstede, and she was by no means pleased at the idea of coming unannounced to spend a night in the home where she had never been treated as the daughter of the house.

But there was plainly no help for it. The darkness had closed in, and the first great drops of a deluge of rain were beginning to fall, so she allowed herself to be hurried by Elgiva down the path which led to the gate, admitting them, through a stackyard at the back, into the house of the thegn. She felt less anxious than ever to enter as sounds of laughter and singing from the hall told that her father was feasting his friends within. She had not forgotten how she had been wont to creep away in terror from the sound of a drunken revel, and she felt inclined to suggest that they should take refuge in one of the detached chambers instead of facing the company in the hall.

"Sure the men from London must be returned," exclaimed Elgiva, not altogether displeased at the idea. "There is goodly company here, at all events."

Her hand was on the gate as she spoke, but she drew back suddenly, with a startled shriek, as a sword flashed in the light that streamed from the house, and a rough voice demanded the pass-word.

"Why, what next?" she exclaimed indignantly. "Is the lady of Hartington to give the pass-word ere she enter her father's hall? Stand aside, fellow, and let the lady Ostritha pass."

"Maidens, by the hammer of Thor!" cried the warrior who had barred the way. "Fly in, my pretty birds, and fill for us that we may drink good fortune to the night's work."

Ostritha seized her maid by the arm. "It is the Danes, Elgiva," she gasped, trembling from head to foot. "They have taken the place; they have slain my father."

Elgiva screamed shrilly and turned to fly, but in a moment the two girls found themselves surrounded. The light of a torch, held high by a man in the background, gleamed upon shining mail, wild faces and naked swords, as, through the courtyard, crowded with armed warriors, they were pushed with little ceremony towards the door of the hall.

"Nay, nay, my fair one," said the man who had seized Elgiva, and who still held her pinioned in spite of her terrified struggles; "thou art not going free to tell news and light need-fires for the country round. All the good folks of Hartington sleep at home this night, save those whose business is under our banner, and thou wilt do well to keep thy tongue quiet for the present."

The sight of the dagger which he bared before her eyes did indeed silence the terrified girl's shrieks, but at the door of the hall her eyes fell upon one of the Hartington men, standing fully armed in the entrance.

"Ceolred," she cried despairingly, trying to stretch out her hands, "Ceolred, thou knowest me; save the young mistress, Ceolred, for Heaven's sake! Strike down the foul pagans!"

The man grinned without moving.

"I know thee well, little Elgiva," he answered; "but we are all pagans here together this night, and fight under the banner that is to make a Danish land of England."

"Is my father slain?" cried Ostritha.

"Not he, my lady," was the laughing answer. "'Tis fools who die by the Northern axes; and Sexwulf the thegn is a wise man, and had sooner drink with his guests than fight with them."

"What means it?" cried the blind girl in a sudden, sharp voice of terror. "Ah, if I could see; sweet Heaven, if I could see! Elgiva, what is it?"

"Oh, lady, lady, I know not," cried the maid. "But the thegn is there at the board, and Earl Sweyne drinking with him, and all the foul Danes sit there too, and pledge each other. Alack, alack! sure we are betrayed."

"Who comes?" exclaimed the familiar voice of the thegn of Hartington from the upper end of the hall. "By your leave, friends, 'tis time we were afoot if our work is to be done ere sunrise."

"One more pledge," cried a voice, which, though Ostritha had not heard it for two years, made her shrink and shudder. "I drink to the thegn of Hartington that shall be thegn of Brockstede ere the sun be up."

"I drink to thee in turn, Sweyne the earl," replied Sexwulf, "that will be counsellor to Hasting when he rules here in England, and will do good to those whose swords have helped him to it."

"And who shall share in the conquest," cried Sweyne; "and here, to make our company complete, comes the one thing we lacked, fair maidens to pledge us and drink good fortune to our arms."

Sexwulf sprang up suddenly as his eyes fell upon his daughter.

"Ostritha," he thundered, "wherefore comest thou hither? Speak, girl, I say! Who sent thee here?"

"Wherefore should she come but to find her lost bridegroom?" cried Sweyne gaily. "Was not my fair bride taken from my arms two years since? And now my good fortune sets her beside me again."

And, rising from his seat, he snatched the terrified girl from the man who held her and placed her on his chair.

"Fill again, fill again," he cried, "and drink to the lady of Hartington, the Saxon bride of Sweyne the earl!"

But Ostritha, who in her helplessness had been half stunned and passive with horror and fear, pushed him from her with all her force.

"Do not touch me, sir!" she cried. "I am no bride of thine. Thou art a pagan, and I a christened maiden. My father, for the love of Heaven, bid him let me go."

"Not I, girl," said the thegn, with a laugh. "So thou art come hither, here shalt thou bide. And if thy good friends at Brockstede sent thee here to spy, we will take thee back to-morrow to warm thy hands at the bonfire there."

Ostritha faced round upon him, her fear swallowed up in horror and indignation.

"Father," she gasped, "unsay it, unless thou wouldst slay me with shame! Thou art not going with the pagans to burn Brockstede."

"Nay, my fair daughter," was the mocking answer, "Brockstede shall not burn, be sure of that, since Sexwulf, its new lord, will find good use for house and stores."

"The church will make bonfire enough to show us the way," cried one of the Danish leaders.

Sweyne filled a horn with mead and held it to Ostritha.

"Thou art pale, my beauteous bride," he cried. "Pledge me here, and drink to our success."

"Ay, let the maidens pledge us, since they will not fill for us," cried another, thrusting his cup towards Elgiva.

Ostritha struck out against her tormentor with the hand he had left free.

"I will not!" she cried passionately. "I will not; let me go!"

"No 'will nots,' my pretty bird," said the half drunken Dane, catching both her wrists in his grasp.

"O mistress, drink; they will slay us," shrieked Elgiva.

"I will not!" cried the blind girl again. "I will not! It is a wicked pledge, and I would rather die!"

The hot blood of her Northern ancestry had rushed into her white cheeks. She was thinking of the young East Anglian king, shot to death with Danish arrows sooner than deny his faith. Death in such com-

panionship seemed sweet and easy. Her face was radiant as she lifted her sightless eyes as if to meet the light of Heaven. But Sweyne held her wrists with one hand and with the other thrust the horn against her lips.

"Drink hael, my pretty bride," he cried in Saxon fashion.

"Let the maid go!" said a voice from the lower part of the hall.

"At whose bidding?" asked the earl, with a laugh.

"At mine," said he who had spoken, a mighty young warrior in bright mail, who rose up suddenly from his seat, a head above those round him, and strode up to Sweyne's table. "Let the maid go her way, I say," he repeated, and with a blow from his unarmed hand he knocked the horn from Sweyne's grasp.

A roar of laughter went up from the revellers.

"Osbern the Fatherless would have the maid for his own share," cried one.

"Nay," said another, "Osbern is himself a follower of the English God; I have seen the symbol about his neck."

"What is that to any but myself?" cried the young warrior furiously. "I serve what master I will, and ask not leave from thee."

Even as he spoke, he flung himself upon Sweyne. He was a head taller, and far more powerfully built than the earl, who had, besides, been drinking heavily. The sudden assault overpowered him and he fell, loosing his hold of Ostritha, and dragging with him

the heavy board, which, laid upon trestles, formed the table, and which fell above him as he lay.

Osbern caught up the blind girl in his arms and strode down the hall. Half in surprise, half in fear of his strength, men made way for him until the door was almost reached. Then Sexwulf's voice thundered—

"Cut him down, men of Hartington! Will ye let him carry my daughter away before mine eyes?"

At the command Sexwulf's men closed about the young Dane. He set Ostritha down, faced round suddenly, and his flashing sword, whirling round his head, cleared his path to the wall. He thrust the girl against it and stood covering her, snatching an axe from a man close to him, and whirling it high above his head.

"Come on," he cried, "come on, ye who know Osbern the Fatherless, and who need a cloven skull!"

As he stood towering above them with the murderous weapon upheaved in his hand, the foremost recoiled for an instant. Others pressed up from behind. Elgiva was left free, and flew to the door and out into the night. Sexwulf's scornful voice sounded above the tumult—

"What, ye gallant warriors, do ye stand in fear of one man?"

There was a rush forward. Poor Ostritha, in her darkness, crouching behind her champion, could hear the scuffling feet and the clash of arms and Elgiva's shrill, despairing shriek for help. Above the heads of the combatants the thunder crashed again. In the midst of the struggle, which she could not see, the

sound appealed to the girl's keenest sense with a perception of a Presence greater than her enemies. Involuntarily she cried aloud in the familiar words which she and Eadgyth spoke daily at their prayers—

> "The shield of God defend me!
> Christ on my right hand,
> Christ on my left."

Was it an answer which rose outside, not the thunder now, but advancing shouts, sounding loud above the storm? No mistake, surely, for those about the door heard them too. There were cries of "The enemy!" a confusion of shouts and hurrying feet, men rushing for their weapons. Then she seemed to feel her champion stagger and sway above her, like a great tree falling. He was beaten to his knees, struggled up again, then fell against her, just as a rush of feet sounded in the doorway. The girl, trying in vain to hold him up with her trembling hands, sank herself beneath his weight until she crouched on her knees with his head upon her shoulder. And all around her there raged a fight, fierce and deadly, armed men springing in through the great door of the hall, swords and axes flashing in the light of candles and torches. Tables were overturned, men stumbled over them and fell beneath them; shouts of fury, cries for mercy, shrieking of men in agony, all the horrible sounds of battle surged round Ostritha as she crouched, half dead with fear, understanding nothing, only dimly conscious that she must guard, if she could, the head of the man who had tried to save her. How long it lasted she could not have told. Something falling

upon her at last flung her down above her deliverer, and held her so that she could not move. She was stunned and half stifled, still conscious enough to try to hold the weight off him, but knowing nothing else until the sound of sobbing reached her as if from far away.

"She is dead; oh, my poor lady; she is dead!" said Elgiva's voice.

And, as the crushing weight was lifted from off her and she could breathe again, she heard another voice, clear and calm, above the tumult.

"Let those who yield them prisoners be spared alive. I command that they receive mercy who yield themselves to me, Alfred the King."

CHAPTER XIV

A Day of Discoveries

"Take my head between thy hands, and kiss my cheeks,
And wash them with thy tears, and say 'My son.'"

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

IN the fair, fresh dawn of the summer morning, when the world was all green and sparkling after the last night's storm, the lady Edburga and her daughter Eadgyth came hurrying along the wood paths which Ostritha and her maid had trodden so wearily the night before. Already the countryside was ringing with the news of the great fight in the hall of Hartington. From village to village the news was flying that Sexwulf the thegn had thought to betray his country to the Danes, that the attack on the fortress had failed because of information sent by him to the enemy, and that a band from the stronghold on the Lea, and another from East Anglia under command of the Earl Sweyne had gathered at Hartington last night with

the intention of attacking Brockstede before morning. And the treason had been defeated by the timely arrival of the king himself. He had come with his host to watch the fortress on the Lea as he had watched Appledore and Mersey Island, and to guard his people's harvest for them till the corn was reaped. The force had been hurried forward, and the king, with the advance guard, had gone straight to Hartington. Father Wulfstan was with them, and he and the king and one other person knew the reason of the unexpected arrival there.

Terrible as was the story of the treason, Lady Edburga's first thought, when the news reached her, was of the helpless girl, who, as the messengers told her, had been in the midst of the fight when her father was slain in his own hall. The men, who had been sent to search for her and Elgiva in the woods when the storm began and the lady grew uneasy about them, had been guided by the sounds of battle to Hartington, and had returned with the tidings that Ostritha had been lifted, more dead than alive, from under the heaps of slain. On which the lady had immediately donned cloak and hood and set out with Eadgyth, under the escort of her son and Wilfrid, to seek the girl who had come to be as her own daughter. There was something very terrible in the signs of strife and bloodshed in the midst of the calm sweetness of the summer dawn. Overhead the light was broadening across the clear, unstained sky, trees and herbs were green and shining after the night's rain, the air was full of the fragrant scent of wet, fruitful earth. And there, in the open space among the woods, there

were the trampled grass and the blood-stained court-yard and prisoners with bound hands and feet, under an armed guard, and still forms laid out cold and silent, stricken down amid all this beauty by the hand of their fellow-men. English women in those days were more used to such scenes than, mercifully, they are to-day, and Edburga passed on swiftly, her one thought for the orphan girl she had come to seek. Eadgyth followed with Wilfrid. As they came through the wood she had asked him one question.

"Wilfrid, didst thou know this before?"

"I guessed at it," he answered simply.

"How long since?"

"Two years and more agone, when the Danish earl carried off our young thegn. We had heard more of Sexwulf's good-will to East Anglia had the pagans' assault not failed."

"Alack, Wilfrid! thou hast guessed at this evil thing so long and said nought?"

"I knew nothing sure, Lady Eadgyth, and was bound to hold my peace and watch."

"As thou hast ever done for our safety," she said softly, "but didst thou speak to none?"

"Ay, to two did I, the king and Father Wulfstan, and better counsellors no man could desire."

Eadgyth thought a moment.

"They say," she said, "that Father Wulfstan is come with the king. Didst thou send him to seek help, Wilfrid?"

"We talked together of what happened on Lea river, Lady Eadgyth, and deemed the king should know it."

"Then hast thou saved us once more," said the girl, looking up at him with her beaming eyes, "how often, Wilfrid, how often again! Verily, my father was wise, as the king said."

There were guards posted at the gate-house of the hall, but the lady of Brockstede was admitted at once. Alfgar heard, in answer to his eager inquiries for the king, that Alfred was gone to watch over the encamping of his army near the river. The good priest, Father Wulfstan, was within with the lady Ostritha, attending upon the wounded. They were mostly Sexwulf's men. The Danes had fought desperately to the death, forming a ring after their fashion in the midst of the hall, and falling where they stood. Sweyne the earl was among the dead. The men of Hartington had yielded to the king's mercy when their master fell. The king had brought with him a leech of wondrous skill, a Scottish scholar, who was tending the wounded. Even while the man was speaking, Ostritha herself came softly out of one of the detached chambers round the great hall, feeling her way along the wall towards the sound of Edburga's voice. The next moment she was in the lady's arms.

"My child, my poor child," said Edburga tenderly, "how is it with thee?"

"Well, since thou art come to call me thus," said the girl fondly, "and since thou wilt be now more than ever mother to me, lady."

Then, after she had stretched out her arms to Eadgyth, she asked—

"Thou knowest all?"

"All, my Ostritha."

"And thou wilt forgive, being merciful as thou art, and because he is dead. He lay awhile sore wounded, and Father Wulfstan was beside him and prayed, and he asked forgiveness of the king and of me."

"All is pardoned at Brockstede," said Edburga gravely, "Ostritha, my child, were it only for thy sake."

"And we will take thee home," said Eadgyth fondly, with an arm round her.

"Nay, not yet. There are so many hurt among my father's thralls, who are mine until the king gives the lands to one more worthy; and there is the Dane who saved me sorely hurt, though Conan the Scot says he will soon be whole again."

"Conan! Is he here?" exclaimed Eadgyth.

"Ay, lady, here am I, a fruitless wanderer yet," said the sweet, rich voice which none of them had forgotten; and Conan, much more presentably dressed than when last he visited Brockstede, stepped out of the doorway from which Ostritha herself had come.

"Brockstede has lured me back, as the falcon stoops to the whistle," he said, as he kissed the ladies' hands in his gay and courtly fashion; "and I had been there ere now, but that my little skill has been claimed by a patient I have tried to heal once before."

"And who may that be?" asked Eadgyth.

"Even one whom thou must aid me once more to heal, Lady Eadgyth, seeing my drugs and salves had been bootless before without thine aid."

"The Dane who freed my brother?" cried Eadgyth eagerly.

"The same, lady. I knew his face when we found the lady Ostritha guarding him at her own peril, and one of the king's men, who knew thy noble father, cried out that 'twas Bernulf come back to cry shame on the treason. But 'twas flesh and blood that had borne the blows, and I knew my patient of two years since, though he has grown a mightier warrior since I had last the tending of him."

"Thou wilt let me have my share this time, since I have to thank him for my son," said Edburga, as Conan led the way across the courtyard.

"I think it is thee whom I have to thank," said Ostritha to Eadgyth, "since it was for thy sake that this pagan has learnt to be gentle to English maids. Doubtless 'twas he who walked by the river side the night before the fight at Hertford. Now will we teach him of the truth; and Father Wulfstan will baptize him and make him one of ourselves. But it is strange that he yet wears the Christian symbol about his neck."

They had reached by this time the room where the wounded Dane lay. Conan, with the quiet touch and tread of a doctor born, pushed aside the hanging that covered the door, and led the lady Edburga to the bedside. After what he had heard from others he was prepared for her start and exclamation as she first caught sight of the face upon the pillow; the likeness which had startled others would certainly strike her too. But he was not prepared for her dropping on her knees by the bedside and seizing the jewel, which,

fastened round the neck of the wounded man, was shining in the sunlight streaming through a narrow window above his head. She rose to her feet, and turned to them all, with white face and strained eyes.

"Whence had he this?" she gasped.

"Mother, what is amiss?" whispered Eadgyth, hurrying to her side. "It is the cross that I saw about his neck before, that he spoke of to Alfgar. Sweet mother, what aileth thee?"

"Wilfrid," said the lady, turning to him as she had done so often in time of need—"Wilfrid, see!"

Wilfrid, waiting outside on the threshold, heard the sharp cry, and was at her side in an instant. She did not speak, but pointed to the jewel. He bent down and examined it carefully. When he looked up his face had paled suddenly, as hers had done.

"It was about the neck of my young lord Elfric the night that I—that I let the pagans take him," he said slowly.

Edburga was trembling from head to foot. She could not speak, but she looked at him again as if imploring an answer, and then pointed to the face on the pillow.

Wilfrid spoke again slowly, as was his wont, as if weighing every word.

"It is the living likeness of my lord," he said. "I saw it before; it is yet stronger now. It is not possible that——"

"That a Dane should so resemble him, and wear that token to boot," said Conan, whose quick intelligence had followed their thoughts. "Wait!" he added, "we have two prisoners. I will see if they

know aught of his parentage." He was gone in an instant, while the group around the bed waited breathless.

Edburga sank on her knees, her hands clasped, her eyes devouring every line of the young man's sleeping face.

Wilfrid followed Conan outside. The sound of his voice was heard after a moment in the court, and Edburga half rose, then knelt again, and waited with bowed head.

It was not more than a few minutes, though it seemed like hours, before Wilfrid returned. He went softly to the lady's side, and spoke without waiting to be questioned.

"The prisoners say the youth's name is Osbern. He is a freed slave, and was a prisoner of war. His master brought him home a child to the northern land after a cruise, the spring that Alfred beat them at Ethandune. He gave him to his wife to bring up; but she had her own children, and cared little for him, so they made him a serf. He won his freedom by his seamanship, and they named him the 'Fatherless,' because none knew whence he came. That is all they know."

"Is it not enough?" said Edburga tremulously.

Wilfrid answered her question by another. "Do you remember, lady, how my little lord stepped upon the red hot iron in the forge the day he was three years old, and thou didst chide the noble thegn for keeping so little watch over him, and the words he spoke in answer?"

"Yes, yes," she said readily. "That it was no evil

thing for a man to be branded who had no fear of being known."

Conan had already lifted the coverlet gently from the sleeper's feet.

Edburga bent down, and put her hand before her eyes.

"I cannot see," she murmured.

"Yet is it here," said Wilfrid quietly—"a scar across the right sole."

"The scar of a burn?" said Conan.

The lady stooped her head and kissed the mark. "It is he," she said slowly. "God and you have given me back my son."

* * * * *

There was much coming and going at Hartington all that long hot summer day. Early in the day a messenger from the king summoned Alfgar and Wilfrid to the camp, where both stayed till evening. Alfred had no intention of wasting his forces by another assault. He had come, he said, to guard the country until the harvest was reaped; and, while no leader of his age had learnt so well to imitate the rapid movements and dashing attacks of the Northmen, none could endure with more dogged patience the weary work of maintaining a blockade until the enemy were starved or tired into submission.

It was twilight when Wilfrid came back to Hartington, leaving Alfgar to hurry home to the pride and delight of reviewing his own levies, in case the king should need his services. The boy's head was in such a whirl of excitement that he had hardly had time to understand his own feelings. He thought for

the first time, as he rode homewards through the cool woodland ways, that, if the morning's strange discovery were true, he was lord of Brockstede no longer. The unknown elder brother, who had passed out of the life of his kindred before he himself was born, must take his father's place. Three years ago the idea might have been bitter to him ; now he felt as if it would cost him little to yield his place, if this stranger, with his pagan and foreign up-bringing, would do his duty by Brockstede and his people. For himself he had learnt, in these last three years, to take for his highest ambition the desire not of rule, but of service. The king had spoken words to him to-day which he recalled with a thrill of keen delight and pride. Landless or not, he could still give his heart and his arm to his sovereign and his country.

Meanwhile Wilfrid, as he came out of the shadow of the wood to the clearing round Hartington, heard the sound of a harp, and was aware of a figure outstretched carelessly on the moss under a great beech tree, touching the strings with light fingers and singing softly to himself in the dusk. There was no mistaking the voice, and Wilfrid stopped as the figure rose.

"There is no need to ask who goes there when the bird tells his own tale so plainly," he said smiling.

"And no hope for the wiliest bird in the darkest of the gloaming to escape thine eyes, most vigilant watch-dog," retorted Conan. "Hither do I come to ply my bootless trade of song-making, out of sight of you great fighters, and yet I am found out."

"Bootless or no, the king asks for thee," said

Wilfrid. "He bade me say that thy place at his side is empty, and that he must see thee as soon as thy sick folk can spare thee."

"I have passed my dearest charge into more skilful hands," said Conan, slinging his harp over his shoulder and walking on side by side with the Saxon.

"He does well then?" said Wilfrid.

"How should he do but well under the care of three such women?"

"Knows he yet what right they have to tend him?"

"Ay, that does he. I tell thee, Wilfrid, 'tis as fair a romance as ever was sung or penned, and had I not been there as physician, I had been ready to pluck out my unhallowed eyes for daring to gaze on such a scene. There knelt the lady by her son's pillow, with such a look in her face as the holy saints may wear to greet those of us who are blest enough to reach them. And, so soon as his eyes opened on her, had she his name, Elfric, on her lips, even as she spoke it by his cradle of old. And, as he lay and gazed on her as in a maze, doubtless with many a strange thing stirring in his mind as a man's dreams follow him when he awaketh, came the lady Eadgyth and knelt by her mother's side, and with her hand on the cross he wears, she began to speak the words of the 'Dream of the Holy Rood.' For it seems that the boy's mother taught him the verses when she fastened the cross about his neck, and therefore did he remember them when his fair nurse sang them over him in his sickness.

"'Thou art Eadgyth,' said he, when he had looked at her awhile.

"'Thy sister Eadgyth,' said she, in the voice which is like the summer wind for softness.

"'I have rocked sister Eadgyth to sleep,' says he, as if dreaming yet.

"'That hast thou, mine Elfric,' says the lady.

"Then did he look about him as if in doubt, saying at last—

"'I am Osbern the Fatherless, who comes none know whence.'

"'Nay,' says she very gently, 'that art thou no more, for thy brave father is in Paradise and thy brother and sister here, and thy mother has her arms about thee, mine eldest son, and will not let thee go.'

"And with that I stole out, feeling I had no place there, and being, moreover, nearer weeping than is fitting for a warrior, while I wondered whether, by the grace of Heaven, I might feel mine own mother's arms thus about me once again. But, as I say, he will do well enough now, and the gentle teachers who have him in charge will soon make a good Christian and worthy thegn of him again; and I must be on my way, lest this fair home make me out of love with a life of wandering."

"Wherefore shouldst thou wander?" asked Wilfrid abruptly.

"Wherefore not? Neither home nor kindred in this world have I nor land to call my own."

"But thou mightest have all didst thou will it," said Wilfrid, with his eyes on the ground.

"Ay, that wot I well. The king is but over good and gracious to strangers. Once and again has he

prayed me to let him gift me with wealth or lands, and chafed because I would have neither."

"I spake not of the king," said Wilfrid, a little impatiently. "Most men, with a name worth having, look to wed and leave it to their sons after them."

"One must have the goodwill of another ere that be done," said Conan lightly.

"And that is not far to seek with powers like thine," said Wilfrid. Then, as his companion did not answer, he stopped short suddenly, and, facing upon him, asked abruptly, "Is she whom thou namest an angel on earth not well fit also to be a bride?"

The Irishman's dancing dark eyes met the Saxon's grave blue ones.

"The lady Eadgyth, meanest thou?" he asked.

"Who but she?" said Wilfrid rather impatiently. "Does she not hang on thy words, watch for thy coming, grieve at thy going, hold thee wisest of all men saving only the king?"

Conan, for answer, burst into that ringing, mirthful laugh of his in which his hearers could rarely help joining, but which struck Wilfrid as being decidedly out of place just now.

"I see not what cause there is to jeer at the love of a fair and noble maiden," he said hotly.

"Nay, my Wilfrid," said Conan, when he could speak for laughing, "thou seest not in very deed, as thou sayest, because, alack! thou canst not see thyself, and needst that another, even my unworthy self, hold up a mirror before thee and show thee certain pictures that will surprise thee. Alack, that a man should be so wise and yet so blind! Why, man,

whose words does the lady Eadgyth ever choose to walk by? Whose but Wilfrid's. Whose counsel is so good, whether in peace or war? Wilfrid's again. Whom must a man copy if he would be noble in word and deed and thought? Wilfrid, says she. Deny it not. I have heard her with mine own ears tell the village children as much. And, as for watching for thy coming and grieving at thy going, have I not seen the light come into her eyes and the rose to her cheeks at the very sound of thy step on the threshold; have I not seen her, when men talked around her of trouble, and of danger to come, look toward thee as if nought could fright her while she knew thee near? Friend Wilfrid, thou hast done great things for thy master's house, but thou wilt have more to do for thy master's daughter."

Wilfrid had neither spoken nor moved. He stood motionless, his eyes on the ground. Under the bronze of sun and weather his strong face had grown white.

"Meanest thou this in good sooth?" he asked hoarsely, when Conan finished speaking.

"Ay, in good sooth, do I, and so will all tell thee that have eyes to see. Lift up thy head, man, and face thy happy fortune."

"No fortune of mine is it," said Wilfrid, looking gravely into the twilight, "if this is indeed as ye say, I have done amiss. The lady Eadgyth must wed one of her own degree, not her father's freeman."

"Beshrew thy folly!" cried Conan laughing half angrily, "would the maiden be happier if a king came suing for her than with the man of her choice? I

will set Father Wulfstan to preach thee not the Christian grace of humility but the pagan sin of pride. Soon we shall have to lift thee on to thy horse, as Theodore did the holy bishop Chad, because thou holdest thyself unworthy to travel the earth save on thy weary feet."

"Thou hast ever thy jest," said Wilfrid smiling.

"I was never further from jesting in my life, I am too angry at thy folly to break a jest upon thee. Why, hadst thou been less bound to thy master's service thou hadst won thyself noble long ere this. I tell thee I look to see thee ealdorman ere thy hair be grey. But, eorl or ceorl, there is only one man in England shall win the lady Eadgyth, and that man stands here aghast at the thought of it. Go thou in, Wilfrid, and think over my words as a wise man may, and I will go make me a song to sing at thy wedding-feast."

And with a laugh and a gay clap on the Saxon's shoulder Conan turned away into the twilight of the woods.

CHAPTER XV

The Turning of the Lea

" Come the three corners of the world in arms,
And we shall shock them ; nought shall make us rue,
If England to itself do rest but true."

King John (Act V, Sc. vii.).

SO the harvest on the Lea banks was reaped that year by the owners of the land, under the protection of the Dragon of Wessex, as it fluttered on the August breeze over the king's watching camp, and the Danes gnashed their teeth in the fort above the river, as the hoped-for spoil was gathered safely into the barns. Alfgar, who had for the present at least, to be good farmer as well as good soldier, spent his time between the camp and his own fields, coming back radiantly happy to cornfield or stackyard if he had a few words of greeting or counsel from the king to bring with him. And Alfred, who had never forgotten the boy's tearful confidences to himself in the hour of his shame and disappointment,

rarely failed to find time to ask a question or to give some commission which it was Alfgar's pride and delight to execute as perfectly as possible.

He generally found Conan somewhere about the camp, making himself, as usual, generally useful. Alfred delighted in his company, liking nothing better when he had an hour to spare, than to turn over a book with the Irish scholar, to hear a song from him, or to set him to read aloud, in the musical voice to which it was so great a treat to listen.

"I marvel sometimes," he said one day, when he had invited Conan to ride with him along the river bank, "that, with thy love of learning and knowledge of the sacred writings, thou didst never give thyself altogether to the holy life."

"Peace sorts not too well with my restless blood, my lord," said Conan smiling.

"Ay, so thou sayest," said the king, "and I will not gainsay thee that there is joy in the striving, if it be for the right. But yet, to one who has a nation to rule, 'tis clear enough how sorely all good things need peace and time in which to grow. What might we not do in this land if we had but quietness? Quietness in which to rest and ponder and lay our foundations broad and strong, and build upon them such things as will last."

"And so will you do, my lord king, once these pirates are chased over seas again, and that time, methinks, will be not long in coming."

"If God will," said Alfred simply. "But," he went on, "'twas of thyself we were speaking. I need such men as thou in my House at Athelney. I need

teachers, and have to send over seas to seek them, so sorely has our land fallen away from the learning that was her pride. I tell thee, that, when I found myself first king of Wessex, there was scarce a man who could read letters, and some among the priests even knew not the meaning of the Latin words they sang."

"You have changed this, my lord," said Conan.

"Somewhat I have done, and more will I do, so Heaven give me rest round about and strength to work, and wise men to be my aid. The rest must be for my children and children's children, ay, and for many a generation yet to come. Thinkest thou the day will ever come when every free man's children, be he lord or churl, will learn to read, at least, in his own tongue? Such an England would I see, with schools throughout the length and the breadth of it, full of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord. Will such days ever come?"

"If they do, you, my lord, will have done your part to bring it about," said Conan warmly, "and English folk in all ages will bless your name for it. But yonder, my lord, goes the sage counsellor of whom we spoke yester even, and whom you talked then of summoning to us to-day."

"Ay, and I would myself speak with him," said the king, spurring towards a solitary horseman, who was riding at a foot's pace along the river-bank.

So absorbed was he in his own thoughts that he did not notice the king until Alfred himself hailed him, when he turned and made his obeisance in some confusion.

"I saw you not, my lord," he said.

"Nay, I saw thou didst not, Wilfrid of Brockstede," said the king, cheerily, "and therefore was I the more desirous to know over what thou wast pondering so earnestly. Is aught doing among the pagans that thou scannest the river with such watchful eyes?"

"Nay, lord king; I have been up the stream nigh to the fort, and 'twas their ships I was pondering over."

"As I do each day," said the king, "wondering when England may put to sea a fleet that shall guard her own coasts without a sword unsheathed on shore. But methinks thou hast matter in thy mind for to-day, not for years to come. What are thy thoughts?"

"Even this, lord king, that, could we cut the pagans from their water-way, they would be forced into fleeing by land, when our army might deal with them, they having no escape."

"And how might that be done?" said the king thoughtfully.

"Even by parting the stream into three channels, my lord, as here it might be done easily. Could we raise a fort on each bank from whence we could guard the work from attack, the thing were speedily done."

"'Tis a good rede and a wise," said the king warmly. "I marvel that I thought not of it earlier; but to thee be the merit of the plan, and it may well be the saving of the place."

And as some of his followers rode up, he at once

communicated Wilfrid's suggestion. He was off his horse the next moment, examining the bank, marking the line of the new channel by which the stream might be turned, and the place where the fort should be erected.

"Let us do it at once!" he exclaimed, flinging himself again into his saddle; "let us to work ere the pagans have time to be before us, that, if they go, they may leave us their ships for hostages. How sayest thou, Alfgar of Brockstede"—and he turned to the lad who had ridden up among his thegns—"hast thou men who can dig such trenches as will cleave Lea river into three?"

"That have we, my lord, at your service," said Alfgar eagerly, "and they shall be here as soon as maybe."

"And do thou, Wilfrid, take the direction of the work," added the king, "seeing the thought was thine which may free the river from the pagans faster than all our swords."

An hour later the spades were at work indeed. Sturdy thralls from Brockstede were among the first on the spot, with their eager young thegn at their head; and Wilfrid, mail and helm laid aside, and arms bare to the shoulder, like one of themselves, was superintending the work, quiet as ever, but with a keen light in his eyes. Through the long summer twilight they worked, and through the short night, one gang of workers relieving another. But at sunrise, and far into the morning too, Wilfrid was still there. Conan came at last, and bore him off to eat and rest.

"Art digging thyself into fame, most noble warrior?" he asked slyly. "We will have a spade upon thy banner for ever."

"I am teaching the Lea river to forswear the pagans' service, as a good English stream should," said Wilfrid in answer.

"Thou art a strange fellow, and I trow I should be disposed to fight thee now and again if I did not love thee instead," said Conan, looking up whimsically into the Saxon's quiet face. "When the pagans are fleeing from Hertford, and their ships are in our hands, wilt thou give us all the chance of doing honour to the man who outwitted them?"

He flung his arm about Wilfrid's shoulder as he spoke with an affectionate gesture which surprised the Englishman, though he did not resist it.

"Wherefore?" he asked, smiling a little; "'twas not so wondrous a thing to remember that a river parted into three is like to be shallower than one stream."

"I have done with thee," said Conan, laughing half angrily; "I will let thee bury thy fame with thine own spade, and away to watch the work going forward at Brockstede, where the gentle souls are turning our captive from his ill ways as thou thinkest to turn Lea water. I trow they have to thank yonder Danish axe that made ready his head for their teaching."

Conan's shrewd observation was not often at fault, and he was probably quite right in thinking that the restored heir of Brockstede had fallen into the tender hands of his mother and sister at a very fortunate

time. It might be a little difficult to say how the wild young pirate would have yielded to their gentle guidance had he come among them in his vigorous strength and independence. Yet, even so, Elfric's was not a very hard heart to win. Like most of his countrymen, the young man had, under his sturdy, stubborn independence, his pleasure in risk and danger and passion for fighting, a deep affectionate nature and half-understood yearnings after home and tenderness. Recollections of the love which had been about him in his early days clung to him through the rough years which followed, and haunted him still after his new surroundings had grown familiar. The Dane, who, half in pity, half out of a perverse desire to spite his comrades, had spared the child's life, finding the boy unwelcome in his own family, turned him over to the charge of the slaves, among whom he grew up. From the first the child had known that he was an outsider, who must stand up for himself and fight his own battles, and the sturdy Saxon temper had risen to the demand, mere baby as he was. It had shown itself in his stubborn refusal to part with the cross he wore—a refusal which he had maintained, chiefly from sheer obstinacy and determination not to be interfered with, since he had only hazy recollections that some one who first fastened it round his neck had held it precious. As he began to develop the size and strength he had inherited from his father, he taught boys older than himself to respect the weight of his fists and the grip of his vigorous young arms. Indeed, the nickname of "the Fatherless," over which he had shed passionate

tears in secret, meant, not only a taunt against the stranger whose name no one knew, but a recognition that the lad was not to be reckoned among his companions, but meant to go his own way and carve his own fortune. And then appeared in the boy that passionate love of the sea and of a seafaring life, which in some natures is as strong and unconquerable as the salt waves themselves. He had won his freedom by the seamanship which had saved his master's boat from destruction in a storm, and from that time he sold his skill and his daring to any one who would take him on a cruise. He sought out the men who had made distant voyages, and heard endless stories about the strange places they had seen—stories in which the imagination of the tellers, and their own simple wonder at all that was unknown to them, mixed up fact and fancy until they read like fairy tales. As he had told Alfgar two years before, it was their need of his skill which had made his companions seek him out again after leaving him struck down with fever in the lonely hut.

It was strange that his first meeting with Eadgyth should have happened at a time when her gentle care of him was likely to touch and impress him. The fair-haired girl at her prayers by his bedside had awakened some dim recollection of the girl-mother who had been used to sing him to sleep. Then, before his careless strength and energy had returned sufficiently to drive away the impression, came his meeting with Alfgar, the association stirred into life by his sister's name and by the words of the old hymn which had been for so long connected with the

jewel he wore. He went back to his adopted country, troubled and dissatisfied, haunted by recollections too dim and hazy to be put into form and yet too strong to be got rid of. Among the East Anglian Danes he had heard more of the faith which the settlers were at least supposed to profess, and what he heard was apt to come back to him, as the great questions of the here and hereafter have come many a time to men during the night watches between the dark waters and the starry skies. And now he lay in the thegn's chamber at Hartington, and watched his mother as she sat beside him, and Eadgyth and Ostritha as they moved to and fro on their ready services for him, and, being powerless to do anything else, thought and remembered a great deal, and looked now back to the days of his Saxon babyhood, and now on to what the future might hold for him. All the tenderness which in his lonely childhood he had sighed after in secret was about him now, and behold it was no new thing, but something which had been part of his life long ago, and which took its empty place again quite easily now that he wanted it so sorely. And the things that they and Father Wulfstan tried to teach him seemed not new either, but simple and natural enough; for human love is, after all, just the shadow of the Divine, and the best promise of heavenly consolation can find no sweeter words than "as one whom his mother comforteth." And besides, being brave Englishwomen in a fighting age, they had no desire at all to hinder his longing to be in the field again, so long as he fought on the right side. In fact, Eadgyth, after a hunt

among the weapons of the conquered Danes, brought in herself his heavy war-axe, which she carried triumphantly in her arms like a baby, that he might be assured that it was safe, and grasp the heft of it again in his thin hands. And Ostritha came near to shedding tears over the battered helm with the great dents which had been made by the weapons of her father's men, though, after all, it had served its purpose and saved the head it covered, and Elfric's helm henceforth must be of another fashion, such as Saxon thegns, not Northern Vikings, were wont to wear to battle. Eadgyth hardly knew how to be happy enough that autumn. That her lost brother should have come back as the merciful enemy for whom she had prayed every day since he had given Alfgar his freedom, that he should have saved her adopted sister Ostritha, and that he should be here, helpless in their hands, to be tended and taught the meaning of his early recollections, was, as Conan said, better than any romance. It was joy to her, too, to go out into the cornfields and watch the reapers at work, and know that it was the king, the father of his people, who was guarding their crops for them, and that, while his banner flew by the riverside, all was safe and secure. She remembered what her mother had told her of the old days of flight and panic, of levies hastily raised and as quickly dispersed, fighting, desperate but half despairing, against the war-hardened forces of the enemy. And now, though the danger was here again, there were the king's regular troops to meet it, each man with his fixed time of service in the field and his certain date for

returning to home and farm work, all in order, all learning the magic power of discipline from the mighty brain that ruled and planned for his country. It was delicious happiness, when Elfric could come home to Brockstede, to guide him from place to place, and introduce him to the home which was so dear to her and was to be his too. To wood and cornland and pasture they went together, Ostritha holding Eadgyth's hand, as she always did for guidance, and stepping fearlessly by her side. The richness and beauty of the fair English homestead were new and strange to Elfric, used to the rocky coasts and wild uplands of his adopted country.

"Small wonder that other folks crave for a share in such a land," he said thoughtfully one day, as they stood watching the last sheaves borne into the stack-yard. "I marvel not that Hasting would fain carve him out a kingdom here, if he might, by force of arms."

"We yield no kingdom to force of arms," said Alfgar, who had come up from the harvest field; "we give it only by goodwill. How likest thou thy share, brother mine?"

"Wherefore my share?" said Elfric, facing round upon him; "not a foot of English ground have I won."

"Nay, not yet. So must thou be content with Brockstede, which our father won for thee and our king confirmed to his sons for ever."

"And to thee first," said Elfric bluntly. "Thinkest thou I come hither to push thee out of thy heritage, I that could not teach mine own thralls how to handle

plough or flail? No franklin am I, and 'tis not on thy ground that I will learn the work."

"The land is thine; I grudge it not," said Alfgar readily. "I have my sword and the king's service, and that is enough for me."

"And I have the sea, where I can hold mine own with the best, a wider kingdom than thine, brother thegn. Wouldst have me eat my heart out here for lack of the salt spray on my lips? I tell thee if thou urgest me more, I'll turn Viking again."

So Elfric said, and most evidently meant what he said. He had his full share of the national obstinacy, and any attempts to shake his determination only strengthened his resolve, until Eadgyth implored Alfgar to cease pressing him, half in fear lest he should carry out his threat, cast off his new allegiance, and return to his Danish allies. It was Ostritha who first made the suggestion—

"Why may not Elfric serve the king by sea even as Alfgar serveth him by land? Has he not himself said that if we would keep our land our own, we must learn first to guard the sea?"

"The king must build ships of another fashion if he would do it," said Elfric—"longer and deeper, and such as may bear a storm in the open sea, not be ever creeping around the coasts. Such boats as lie yonder in Lea river may serve the turn of a band of pirates, not a king who would make his country mighty upon the waters."

"So also says Alfred," said Alfgar readily, "and for that he draws the form of the ships he would build, and takes counsel with such seamen as Othere

and Wulfstan the Dane, who have made great voyages and are wise in the building of boats. Ah, Elfric, thou wilt come with me to the camp, and thyself tell the king of the cruises thou hast made, and how thou wouldst shape our ships? Trust me, he will hear thee gladly."

"Oh, Elfric, thou wilt go?" said Eadgyth eagerly.

Her tall brother looked down at her with a smile and a shrug.

"Wherefore should I serve the English king?" he said.

"Because thou art thy father's son," said Eadgyth promptly; "ay, and ten times more because to serve him is to serve the noblest of leaders and to fight in God's good cause."

"We shall see," said Elfric, as if not quite willing to commit himself. "A masterless man have I been since I won my freedom."

"One might be thrall to our king and count it honour," said Alfgar enthusiastically. "Come thyself and see."

But Elfric would make no promises. True Saxon that he was, he was half shy or afraid of being led into hasty pledges and relinquishing his accustomed ways of thought; he intended casting in his lot with his own nation, but he wanted to do it slowly and without committing himself by promising too much.

His mother, who seemed to understand his feelings instinctively, assured Alfgar that all would be well if he would only be patient. "'Tis all new to him as yet; bide only till he grows used to things here, and

the king will have the better servant in him for that he thinks well ere he acts."

Meanwhile Wilfrid's rough engineering was going forward vigorously. Already a hastily built fort on each bank of the river protected the work being carried out below them, and the discomfited Danes, from their camp at Hertford, watched, without power to prevent it, the closing of their water-way. Alfgar took his sister and Ostritha one afternoon to within sight of the new fortifications, explaining to them how the work had been done, and breaking out into eager praise of Wilfrid, who had not studied the Danish defences for nothing.

As the three drew near home they were met by Oswin the falconer hurrying to meet them, evidently full of importance.

"What is to do, Oswin?" cried Alfgar.

"To do, master? Matter enough indeed. Here is the king come to lie to-night at Brockstede!"

"The king! and I not there to greet him!" and Alfgar was off like an arrow from a bow, leaving the others to follow, with a lack of politeness which brothers of sixteen have not quite outgrown even in our civilized age. Eadgyth, however, was as much excited as himself.

"Wherefore comes the king, Oswin?" she asked; "this is no new assault on the pagans."

"Nay, lady; the king is well content to leave the pagans to attack themselves if they will. But he has ridden through the woods and watched the dogs pull down a deer with as good pleasure as if it had been Hasting himself we were chasing, and he has looked

at the stock of hawks for this winter, and I vow he knows more of the food to be given the young ones than I know myself."

"Why, here is a marvel indeed!" said Eadgyth, with her gay laugh. "Could the king teach even thee something thou knowest not, Oswin? Verily, he must be wise indeed."

"That know we all," said the old falconer; "yet, lady, the marvel is that the king, with the weal of all the land in his hands and the pagans to fight, has thought or care to waste on the running of hounds or the flying of falcons. 'Tis a strange thing to think upon, to my mind."

"Nay, I think not," said Eadgyth, "since the king is wise enough to have eyes for all God's good works. And what thinkest thou, Oswin? I have heard say that the great Bishop of Sherborne, the king's good friend, has writ down that skill in hunting is itself the gift of God."

"Nay, now, Lady Eadgyth," said the old servant, shaking his head, "that sayest thou to please me as thou art wont. The blessed gifts of Heaven are the writing of great books or the singing of holy psalms, for which my voice is over-cracked by the calling of my birds."

"All good gifts are the gifts of Heaven," persisted Eadgyth, "so says the bishop, Oswin, not I, and thou darest not say the bishop nay. Why, how now, my Ostritha, what ails thee? Comest thou not to the hall?" she went on in surprise, as Ostritha loosened her clasp of her hand and hung back.

"I will to the church, Eadgyth," said the blind

girl. "I must—I must pray for all I love and for myself this evening. Tell the lady so if she ask for me."

"Dost fear the king, sweet sister? Sure thou hast no need; he is all goodness and gentleness to every one. Come with me, and thou shalt see."

"Thou dost forget," faltered Ostritha, with crimson cheeks and drooping head, "Hartington had sold the king's host to the pagans."

"I forget nothing," said Eadgyth boldly; "I forget not that thou art good and true as any maid in England, and that the king is wise and just. Come to him, and thou wilt know."

"Ay, I will come by-and-by, Eadgyth, I promise thee. I have to say with the king myself. But not now, if thou lovest me, Eadgyth. I shall find Father Wulfstan and tell him what is in my heart, and take his counsel. Will that content thee?"

"Yes, if it contents thee, my Ostritha, though I had fain gone into the hall with my hand in thine. But as thou wilt. I will tell my mother thou hast sought Father Wulfstan."

And with a kiss on Ostritha's bowed head she went on, leaving the blind girl to steal softly in through the open door of the church. Eadgyth knew that she spent many hours there, kneeling alone at early dawn and late evening on the stone floor, as if she felt herself guilty of the death of the thegns who had lain before the altar, as though appealing with their still upturned faces against the traitor who had sold them to their enemies.

All the dark story of Sexwulf's treachery had

come to light bit by bit from the confession of his own followers. Ostritha knew that his treasonable alliance with the Danes of East Anglia dated from three years back, when it was to have been cemented by her own marriage with Earl Sweyne. She knew that it was to the Dane's good-natured fancy for the brave, free-spirited boy, that Alfgar owed his safety, since his death had been one item in the agreement with Sexwulf. She knew that her father's guest, the ealdorman, owed his life to Wilfrid's vigilance; and she knew, moreover, that she herself had been confided to the Lady Edburga's care to lull the suspicions of the Brockstede household and to make their destruction the easier. That all was forgiven she knew well, but her friends' goodness to her and her own passionate affection for them made the bitter shame of the treason which she had so unconsciously helped, all the harder to bear or to forget.

CHAPTER XVI

King's Captain and King's Thegn

"And Alfred, king of the Saxons,
Had a book upon his knees,
And wrote down the wondrous tale
Of him who was first to sail
Into the Arctic seas."

LONGFELLOW.

MEANWHILE in the hall of Brockstede the Lady Edburga was watching, with a strange mingling of anxiety and pride, her younger son presenting her elder one to the king, to whose service she had devoted him in his cradle. She and her husband used to talk, in those days, of the time when Elfric would take his place as a warrior under the king's banner, little dreaming that Elfric's first fighting was to be done in another camp, and that he would come before Alfred in his father's hall as a wild Viking, with all his Saxon ways and his Christian faith to learn. It was not wonderful that his mother should ask herself a little anxiously how he would

brook the submission to the English king, against whom he had drawn his sword. But Alfgar's beaming, eager face expressed no anxiety at all. The king was so completely his ideal of all that was lovable and noble, that he never doubted that Elfric, once brought into contact with his hero, must yield to his influence directly. Nor was he mistaken. Alfred had that true kingly quality, the gift of knowing men and drawing their best from them, besides the wide sympathy and keen interest which are the foundations of tact. He met Alfgar's eager face with a smile as joyous as the boy's own.

"Thou dost well for me, my friend," he said readily. "I mind me how, three years agone, thou didst meet me here to offer me thy service in thy father's place, and now thou bringest me a copy of my friend a few inches nearer to the thegn than thou art thyself. I could believe 'twas he stood before me as he came to me with good cheer in the dark days at Athelney."

And then, as Elfric bent his head in a half-doubtful obeisance, he went on—

"Welcome thou art, Elfric, son of Bernulf, to thy home and thy father's friends, and the more welcome for that thou bringest us the wisdom of other lands."

"Little wisdom do I bring, lord king," said Elfric, returning at last the king's frank look. "My days for getting learning I spent among those who recked but little of such matters."

"Yet had they wisdom of their own for which we may be the better," said Alfred readily.

"I got little from them, lord king, save to take a boat along a rocky coast."

"Ay, and what better?" said the king warmly. "If thou bringest some seaman's craft with thee thou art ten times welcome, for it is strong in my mind that the greatness of our people hereafter shall be upon the seas in the midst of which we have been set."

"Lord king, my brother guides a boat as I would guide a horse," put in Alfgar eagerly.

"Then will we find worthy boats for him to guide," said the king, with his ready smile, "and set him over fairer ships than those he brought up the Lea river."

"Worthier ships than those there must be," said Elfric, as if speaking his own thoughts involuntarily, "for a nation that would bear rule on the waters. Such fit well enough for a Viking cruise; for a sea fight or a storm far from shore it needs something wider and deeper."

"Sayest thou so!" exclaimed King Alfred eagerly; "such is mine own thought, and such work my ship-builders shall do this winter if Heaven give us quietness for it. But thou shalt tell me thy thoughts, Elfric, and right welcome thine aid will be to me."

And, through the supper that followed, the king kept the young man by his side, plying him with a string of interested questions, Elfric answering and suggesting with such ready goodwill and such a keen delight in the subject as seemed to transform him altogether.

The Brockstede men listened with wonder and

growing respect for their young master. Their love of his name and lineage, and his own remarkable likeness to the good thegn Bernulf, had influenced them in his favour; but, like many of their countrymen in a more enlightened age, they distrusted what was foreign and unfamiliar, and had very little opinion of an art they did not understand. But Alfred had, more than any man of his age, that wide outlook which welcomes the good from whatever quarter, and seeks eagerly for the knowledge which lies beyond the near horizon.

The men sitting at the board in the lower part of the hall might well think more of their thegn's foreign-bred son when they noted the king's eager questioning of him and keen interest in his answers, and heard how readily and fluently he could speak on the matters he really understood and loved. And, when supper was ended, Alfred would have him come with him to the chamber which had been hastily adorned with the best the house contained, and summoned Conan with parchment and ink-horn to set down his views on the building of the new fleet.

It was late when Father Wulfstan, who had been to a distant part of the parish, came to the hall to ask if the king had retired to rest.

"Rest! nay, not he, my father," said old Oswin, with a laugh—"not while our Danish thegn will tell him of long-ships and oars and voyages over seas. There sits he yet and talks as one would tell tales to a bairn, and no bairn ever more ready to listen. Soothly, our new master has found his tongue at last.'

"Ay, when he has found one with more wit than all ye thick-brains here to listen, friend Oswin," said the father good-humouredly, "and I will gladly make one of his listeners, if I may."

And he went out into the courtyard, where Ostritha, with her veil pulled over her face, stood waiting for him.

"Come, my child, and fear not," he said, taking her hand; "thou shalt thyself speak with the king, and thou wilt find him no more fearsome than thine own mother would be."

He led her to the room set apart for the king, where, as Oswin had said, lights were burning and Elfric's voice could be heard speaking. The priest and the maiden lingered a moment on the threshold, and could hear the words—

"So, wishing to find out how far the land lay right north, or whether any men dwelt north of the waste, we went right north near the land, and left, all the way, the waste land on the right and the wide sea on the left, for three days. Then were we as far north as the whale-hunters ever go." *

The speaker paused, and the rapid moving of the pen filled the silence.

"Dost thou note that?" asked the king of Conan.

"Yea, lord king."

"Then say on, Elfric, if thou art not weary."

"It is thyself, lord king, who must needs be weary."

"Not I," was the ready answer; "to such marvels

* Voyage of Othere, the Norwegian, described in King Alfred's "Orosius."

as thou tellest, a man might listen for ever and not tire. Verily, it is a very wide and wondrous world."

As the guard at the door opened to Father Wulfstan, the king was looking up into the face of the young Viking with the keen delight of a child listening to a tale. Clearly there was a bond of sympathy between the two—that longing to penetrate into the distant and unknown, which has sent men in all ages into pathless desert and frozen sea, and has left the bones of Englishmen in all the waste places of the earth.

"Father Wulfstan craves leave to speak with his lord King Alfred," said the attendant in the doorway.

The king turned promptly to the business of the moment.

"Bid the holy father welcome. We will speak more of these things, Thegn Elfric. And when thou hast aided me to build a fleet thou wilt aid me to guide it, instead of my sending beyond seas for captains from among the Frisians as I have done heretofore."

"Such skill as I have I will give, lord king," said Elfric, meeting the king's smile with a look as frank as his own; and he went from Alfred's presence a wild Viking no longer, but a heart-whole follower of the leader who had known how to win his allegiance.

Meanwhile Father Wulfstan had led Ostritha forward.

"The king will see thee alone, as thou desirest, my daughter," he said encouragingly; "have no fear."

"Nay; why should the lady of Hartington fear me?" said Alfred, himself coming forward to meet the girl as he signed to those about him to withdraw.

Ostritha put her veil back from her tear-stained face.

"I am not lady of Hartington, my lord," she faltered, "and I am Sexwulf's daughter."

"What is that between thee and the king, lady?" was the gentle answer. "Tell me how I can aid thee?"

"Who is with you, lord king?" said the blind girl, with the pathetic turning of her head as if to make her ears do duty for the want of sight.

"There is none here but thyself, lady;" and Alfred took one of the slender hands in his firm, kind clasp. "Come hither and sit thee down, and then tell me all as thou wilt. Nay, thou must not weep," as Ostritha sank into the chair he set for her, and hid her face in her hands.

"Alas, my lord," she said between her tears, "thou knowest all my father's treason."

"Yea, I know it," said Alfred gently. "God in mercy averted the ill; and Sexwulf is dead and stands at His judgment seat, not ours. It is over, lady; we can hold no malice with the dead. And for thyself, poor child," he went on compassionately, "thou art at least guiltless of all."

"You are good and merciful, my lord," said Ostritha, lifting her earnest face to him as if she divined the grave pity in his eyes. "You know the harm he purposed to yourself and to this land, but

not all that he would have brought upon my best friends on earth. The lady of Brockstede stood between me and the pagans when I was a baby. Her daughter saved my life three years ago. They took me to themselves, a helpless, wild maiden, knowing no good thing. They taught me, tended me, made me as one of their own. And he—I have learnt it only bit by bit, my lord—he bribed Earl Sweyne, when he asked to wed me, to carry off the young thegn. It was the Dane's mercy, not his, that spared his life. And he let me abide with them at Brockstede that the lady might credit his friendship and goodwill; and so would he have slain them all as guerdon for their goodness to me, and I had been the snare to make them deem all was well."

She hid her face again as the tears strangled her voice, and Alfred touched the bowed head with the tenderest compassion.

"Poor maiden," he said very gently; "thank God, Who defeated so evil a purpose."

"My lord king," said the girl, raising her face, "it was one man who, under Heaven, saved them and me."

"Methinks I know whom thou wouldst say," said Alfred, smiling; "is his name Wilfrid?"

"Ay, my lord, such it is. 'Twas he who guessed my father's purpose and watched against it all these years, when he might well have been winning honour and renown, and been himself a thegn ere this. He would have saved the rout at Hertford had they abided by his counsel, and I trow the ealdorman owes his life to the guard he set about him. 'Twas

he told Father Wulfstan of his fears, and brought you, my lord, to save me from death or worse. Ah, my lord, do I not owe him my prayers each day of my life; for what good should my life do me but for him?"

"We all owe him more than may well be paid," said the king warmly. "Besides that, I trow, the freeing of the Lea river is like to be his doing. Therefore do I ask thee, lady, as did the king in Holy Writ, what is best to be done for the man whom we shall delight to honour?"

"Ah, lord king," said the girl, falteringly, "if it be not presumptuous in me to crave one thing. The lands of Hartington are masterless."

"I thought to make them thy dower, lady," said Alfred thoughtfully.

"Oh, nay, nay," said the girl, shrinking as if in pain, "I could not bear it; they are too full of evil memories. But if they were in his keeping who saved me from the bitterest shame and set his own faith against my father's treason, then I were happier than ever I thought to be."

"Thinkest thou it would be a gift after his mind?" asked the king.

"My lord, he loves Eadgyth of Brockstede, and she loves him with all her heart, but he will never lift his eyes to her while he is a landless ceorl and folks could flout her for wedding with one not noble. And Hartington is so near to Brockstede that he might yet give the young thegn and the lady his counsel as of old."

"Thou givest a wise woman's good counsel, Lady

Ostritha," said the king smiling. "And for thyself, what is thy will?"

"The lady of Brockstede will let me bide with her," answered the girl. "I had thought to hide my head in some holy house, but if Eadgyth weds I will abide with the lady, who is as a blessed saint and forgives all that is past."

"Thou art as wise for thyself as for others, Lady Ostritha," said the king kindly. "For Wilfrid thy will shall be done ere the world is a day older. King's thegn shall he be, and happy the king who has so tried a servant, and lord, moreover, of the lands of Hartington, and free to wed the lady he has guarded so well. Nay, thou owest me no thanks," as Ostritha tried to falter her gratitude. "'Tis all fairly won, and will be honourably worn, I doubt not. And I pray Heaven make thee happy, Lady Ostritha, among those thou art so fain to serve."

"I have but little power of service, lord king," said the girl, accepting the hand he gave to guide her.

"My child," said Alfred gently, "if God makes the way hard for us, He gives us the more of His aid. So have I found, to whom the path hath not been easy."

He sighed a little as he spoke, but he smiled at the same time. The hardness of the path, the pain, the weariness, the constant toil and danger had never blinded his eyes to the brightness of life, never blighted his warm heart or daunted his happy faith. He himself led Ostritha to the door, and would have

guided her further, but she stooped her head to kiss the hand that held hers, whispering that she knew her way well and the darkness made no difference to her. Yet he stood watching her until she disappeared, with the kindly smile in his eyes, and then looked away from her up to the soft night sky, radiant with the calm eyes of stars. To such a man, the world, in spite of the ill that stains it, will always be as God called it, "very good."

The next morning Eadgyth was out before the sun was up. She was always an early riser, and she had the excuse of looking for a certain hen which was supposed to be laying away; or rather it was the happy thoughts that had haunted her dreams which woke her before the rest of the world, and sent her out into the fields, where she could enjoy them to her heart's content. She had felt so sure that the king would know how to find Elfric the work that would make him happiest, and, sure enough, he too had given in his allegiance to her father's loved leader, and was going to win fame in the cause of God and his country in the way he loved best. And the all-powerful king had done something for Ostritha too, though as yet she knew not what, only, her adopted sister had whispered, as she lay in her arms that night, that all was well, and that surely no one in the world had ever been at once so wise and gentle and kind. And if the girl had another thought that sang with the wakening robins and shone in the first sun rays that pierced the morning mists, it was something so joyous and so sweet that she did not put it into words even to herself. But she did what was very

unusual for such a practical and punctual person, she forgot the time and the wandering hen too, and lingered in the distant pasture-lands, watching the mist wreaths along the river roll away before the sun, and building joyous castles in the air for the future, until she was suddenly recalled to the present time by a mighty shout rising from the house she had left. Three times it went up, echoing among the woods, startling wild creatures in the quiet of the morning, making Eadgyth's heart throb quick, while a thousand conjectures rushed through her brain. Even as she started running towards home her first alarm had changed to eager excitement. Ears trained by experience of stormy times had learnt to distinguish between the cheer of joy and triumph and the stern war-shout of men called suddenly to battle. There was good news at the hall this morning, and where had it come from and whom did it concern, and whose work was it? Eadgyth's fair face glowed with something more than the run up-hill. Oh, why had she chosen to go out on this particular morning, and what had possessed her to be dreaming all that way off when such stirring tales were being told and she was not there to hear them? As she reached the entrance to the village there came a fresh burst of shouting, and out to meet her there rode a band of horsemen with Alfgar among them, the morning sunbeams glinting on his arms. As Eadgyth called to him breathlessly he turned a face as radiant as the morning.

"Eadgyth, art thou there? Hast not heard the news? The pagans are gone. They fled from the

fort in the night. The ships are ours, and the king will go northward after the army, and I go with him."

"The pagans gone?" was all Eadgyth could gasp.

"Ay, thanks to Wilfrid's dealing with Lea river. They saw there was no fleeing that way, and they are off overland. Farewell, sweet sister. We will be back ere long with glorious news. They all say the pagans are bound to yield them now."

He had sprung from his horse to kiss her, and mounted again hastily as the king himself rode up. Alfred smiled down on the two.

"Farewell," he said, "Lady Eadgyth. If I take thy brother from thee ere he have told thee all the news, I will send thee back one to end the tale, and so win my pardon."

And before the bright autumn day had drawn to evening, the king kept his word. For, when the sky was rosy with sunset, two horsemen rode along the river to Brockstede, one of whom turned up towards the hall, while the other, dismounting, led his horse along the path by the river bank towards a grove of poplars, where his quick eyes had detected a white kirtle against the green. It was the place where Eadgyth had dragged Ostritha out of the water, and was a favourite spot with her, as perhaps this quiet-faced warrior knew. At any rate, he went straight there, making so little sound upon the soft meadow turf that the girl, who stood leaning against a tree looking along the golden line of the river, never heard him until he was at her side. Then she turned with a cry of joy and held out her hands to him.

"Ah, Wilfrid," she cried, "art thou come?"

"Didst thou look for me, Lady Eadgyth?" he asked, still standing a few paces from her.

"Yes; I knew thou wouldst come," said the girl softly, while the rosy colour flushed suddenly up to her forehead.

"The king bade me come to thee," said Wilfrid slowly, "and tell thee that the pagans have fled northward, leaving their ships in the river, and he himself follows hard at their heels, while the men of London will deal with the boats."

"It is all glorious news," she said joyously, "and Wilfrid—I trow there is more yet."

"Yea, Lady Eadgyth," he answered simply, "more there is, thanks to the king's grace, and good is it to me, if thou deemest it good. King's thegn am I henceforth, and, by the prayers of the lady Ostritha, lord of Hartington."

The girl's blue eyes shone with happy tears.

"Sweetest Ostritha," she said softly; "so will good faith atone for foul treason." And then she stopped and looked at him again, as if waiting.

"Ay," he said, "and there is more yet, but it is not new, Lady Eadgyth; only that I have held thee first and dearest of all the world since the days I watched by thy cradle side. Yet had I never dreamt of more than to serve and shield thee with my life, I, who was but thy noble father's man, and only that by his goodness and forbearance, when I had earned the shame of a coward and lost him his eldest son."

"Whom thou hast found again," said the girl softly,

"besides the saving of us all not once or twice, thou, his most tried friend, to whom he trusted us."

"Ay, he did," said Wilfrid, with a sudden smile lighting his grave eyes, "and I had deemed it like betraying of that trust to ask thee for yet more, lady, were it not for certain words of Conan's, and, moreover, that the king himself sent me to thee. If he bade me tell thee of this, then he deemed it not all unmeet that I should ask thee for a greater trust."

"Oh, Wilfrid, Wilfrid"—and the blue eyes overflowed; "it is I who must ever seek to be more worthy."

He took the hands she held out to him in a strong clasp, and, drawing her near to him, kissed her forehead with a grave reverence, as if he were even yet not quite sure of his own happiness, until her look and the clasp of her arms put doubt away for ever, and crowned the long faithfulness with a glory better than lands or name.

They had not to tell their own news at the hall. Conan, who had ridden with Wilfrid to Brockstede, had gone on before them, and the two found him with the lady in the garden, where late bees still hummed over the herbs. Edburga's fair face was very joyous as she came to meet them, holding out a hand to each.

"Welcome, Wilfrid," she said, with her radiant smile, "dost credit at last that I can trust my treasures to thy keeping?"

"The king has told me so, lady," he answered, bowing his head over the hand she gave.

"Then I may not chide thee for asking the best

assurance in all England. And we can best thank thee for all by putting our dearest into thy keeping, even as I promised thee long ago."

There was much to be talked over that night by the little party who gathered about the hearth. Both Conan and Wilfrid thought that the "great army" of Hasting had struck its last blow for the present. Cut off from their East Anglian allies, they might entrench themselves somewhere for the winter, as was their wont, but would surely scatter at the approach of spirng. The ships were to be taken, if possible, to London, whither Elfric would go by the king's wish to carry out his plans for the building of vessels on a larger and more powerful scale. The danger was over for a while. Untiring vigilance and prompt action had saved the land again.

"Thanks be to God," runs the chronicle, in which we may surely read the very words of the king who taught Englishmen to read their own history in their own tongue, "the army had not utterly broken down the English nation."

Conan tuned his harp and sang more sweetly, Eadgyth thought, than he had ever done before—sang, after the fashion in which his own countrymen handed down their records from father to son, of all that had come to pass in these years of struggle. And after he had stirred them by the charging of the host, and the clash of arms, and the sweep of the ships through the water, he paused and sang softly the "Dream of the Holy Rood." And Ostritha smiled him her thanks, and Elfric drew his chair nearer and listened with grave eyes.

Conan was going with him to London. The others understood that the young Irishman meant to smooth his way for him among his new surroundings. When the spring came, so Edburga's gentle questionings drew from him, he was leaving England. The wandering fever was upon him again, he told her playfully, and he was honoured by being sent to bear the king's alms and messages.

"And thou wilt seek us out on thy return?" the lady said to him.

"Even as the dove flew to the Ark," he answered. "Dost remember, lady, the old parable that the thegn spoke in the hall of Edwin of Northumbria—how the life of the pagan folk was like to a bird flying through the lighted hall from darkness out again to darkness, not knowing what was beyond? So methinks has it been with me. A bird of passage I am, and know not well whither I go."

"Nay, sir," said the lady gently, "for thee there can be no passing into the darkness, with St. Patrick's breastplate to guard thy heart. And, for us, we have been as those who of old entertained angels unawares."

"It is I who have passed among the angels," he answered; "and my best hope will be that the prayers from yonder church go sometimes after me."

Next day the whole neighbourhood turned out upon the river banks to see the ships, which had come to bring terror and destruction, taken formal possession of by the men of London, who had suffered so cruelly at the hands of the Danes. Some of them

were destroyed at once, and the children from the villages round shouted gleefully over the bonfire, while their elders stood watching with grim pleasure the flames curling about the vessels which had ever been the harbingers of trouble and fear.

Elgiva, by her young mistress' side, had described the scene to her, and joined in the universal triumph, and Ostritha missed Elfric's voice in the shout as he stood near her, keeping her from the pressure of the crowd. There was a link between the two in the common love of that sea which had been the playmate of Ostritha's lonely childhood, and she could understand the young Viking's regret for the vessels he had been used to guide.

"Thou dost grieve to see the good ships burning," she said softly to him.

He half laughed. "I had sunk them myself in fair fight," he said, "and not grieved a jot. But such a burning has to me something of the sacking of a homestead, since a ship's deck has been in very deed my home."

"Thou wilt guide a fairer ship yet," said the girl, with her quick instinct of comforting; "and thou hast a home now to fight for."

"Ay," said the young man thoughtfully; and then, turning suddenly upon her, he said abruptly, "Thou wilt not weep again as thou didst in the king's chamber that night."

"Nay, that will I not," she answered readily—"by the king's goodness and the lady Edburga's."

"I do not like thee to weep," he said, with his awkward, kindly sympathy. "I had tried then to

comfort thee, but that methought the king would do it best. See here, little maid Ostritha, when they told me yonder of the goodness of the God of Heaven, I looked at thee and thought it was ill done of Him Who rules the world to let thee go thus in darkness. But now it seems to me that it is ordered thus that we who are strong may have something to fight and care for beyond gain or glory. Now, thou art wiser than I, for all I can carry thee in mine arms. Wilt thou guide me and pray for me at home, if I fight for thee and guard thee as best I may?"

That was Elfric's wooing—a strange one enough—but Ostritha seemed to understand it, for her little hands went fearlessly into his, as she had clung to him for protection in her father's hall.

"And so thou, too, art leaving a pledge to bring thee home again?" said Conan to Elfric, as the two rode away together next day along Lea side.

"Methinks," said Elfric, "that a man fights none the worse for it. Didst never dream of it thyself?"

"The hands that set thy home on fire burnt mine," said Conan lightly.

"Ay; but why not dream of making a fresh one?"

"A man dreams of many things, and wakes to find them dreams. A bird of passage am I, friend Elfric, but my flight is sometimes through fair lands, and the memory of them abides with me even when I leave them behind."

"Mayhap thou wouldst grow weary of abiding in one place," said Elfric thoughtfully.

"Mayhap," said Conan, with a laugh; and he

glanced over his shoulder as if he saw still the picture he had left behind—Eadgyth waving to him from the threshold of her home at Brockstede, with the morning sun upon her yellow hair and Wilfrid by her side.

CHAPTER XVII

ORPHANED ENGLAND

"Great in council and great in war,
Foremost captain of his time,
Rich in saving common sense
And, as the greatest only are,
In his simplicity sublime. . . .
Such was he whom we deplore,
The long self-sacrifice of life is o'er."

TENNYSON.

FOUR years had passed since Conan the Scot rode away from the home at Brockstede. Four years of peace and progress they had been to England, of happiness and prosperity to the little household on Lea Side. It was autumn again, the beginning of November, bright with the short sunshine of St. Martin's summer, that still, misty sunshine which has a charm all its own, and which seems so fit to enshrine the festival of All Saints. In the woods around Brockstede the yellow leaves fluttered with scarcely a rustle to the ground, the autumnal hush was only broken by the winding of a hunting-

horn now and again through the trees, or the shout of the swineherd following the pigs as they crunched beechnuts and acorns among the underwood. The busy work of autumn, the threshing and the salting, was going on at the homestead. It was late afternoon and the shadows were lengthening across the open space before the gate-house, where a little group were just parting for the evening.

The lady Edburga was there, a fair-faced woman still, though the little swaddled bundle she held in her arms belonged to the third generation. Ostritha, standing beside her, was touching the child's sleeping face with the light fingers which alone could make the little features familiar to her.

"Thou art very sure that he is like his father," she said.

"Quite sure, my Ostritha. Now he sleeps there is his very look, and his grandfather's also."

"Even the face that so set me wondering in Frigyth's hut," said Eadgyth. "We shall have the thegn Bernulf walking again in arms by Lea Side to fright evil-doers. But I must be on my way home if I am to reach Hartington before nightfall. Come, Bernulf, Alfred, where are ye, little lads? Come and bid grandmother good night."

A pair of sturdy twin boys came at her call up the path from the village, announcing, in the language of three years old, some news of great interest, intelligible to few ears but their mother's. Eadgyth interpreted it, however, and exclaimed eagerly—

"Warriors coming, say ye? Where then? What if it were the fathers?"

"Ah, now shall we know if the evil news be true," exclaimed Ostritha.

The next moment a group of horsemen appeared in sight, and Eadgyth, after one glance, exclaimed—

"It is themselves," adding, for the sister who could not see them, "Elfric and Alfgar are there, and Wilfrid and another," and with her little sons clinging to her kirtle she hurried forward to meet her husband. It was not the usual joyous greeting at the thegn's glad home-coming. There was an anxious question in Eadgyth's eyes, and Wilfrid's, as they met her look, were full of a grief which answered her before he could put it into words.

"It is true?" she asked him under her breath.

"Alas, my Eadgyth, yes. We have lost our father."

A sudden burst of weeping made her lift her head from his shoulder. The fourth horseman stood with his face bowed upon his horse's neck, sobbing in passionate abandonment of grief. Wilfrid led his wife towards him.

"Dost thou not know him?" he whispered, "it is Conan. He came too late to see the king, and he is nigh distraught with grief. Thou must comfort him, Eadgyth, for I trow none else can."

So Eadgyth, with her tears flowing fast, went to the stranger, who was weeping with the passionate grief of the Kelt for the English king who made strangers welcome, and whispered to her little sons to lead him into her father's hall. And Conan caught up the boys and kissed them for the sake of their fair, frank faces and blue eyes, and shed fresh tears over

their sunny hair, and went in, with the children, half scared, half proud, holding his hands. Round the hall fire the sad company gathered, while the house-carles and the maids clustered round the door, to listen to the story of how, as his loving biographer says, "the stillness he had sighed for came" to King Alfred, six days before the feast of All Saints. To all of them it was, as Wilfrid had said, the loss of their father; and Alfgar, man and soldier as he had grown, laid his head down on the table and wept like a child as he told of the king's charge and last wise counsels to those about him. All the time Eadgyth's boys stood by Conan's chair, fascinated by him as children always were, yet looking to their mother in puzzled distress that a grown man should weep. Wilfrid had whispered to his wife that the Scot had arrived after his four years of wandering only in time to be present when the king was laid to his rest at Winchester, and was full of envy of the brothers who had been in attendance upon him and had the mournful happiness of the last words.

"I had so much to say to him," he said piteously. "Ever when I met things strange and new, I thought how those eyes of his would look up at me while I told them, as if he came halfway to meet the words. Who is there now who will welcome us wanderers, and learn from the lands over seas how to guide his own, as he did?"

At Brockstede and Hartington, at any rate, Conan knew well that he would always be welcome, and just now he was ready to submit to Elfric's and Alfgar's warm pressure that he should stay where he was and

rest. He looked worn and haggard, as if he had passed through some rough experiences, though, after a little while, the old gay nature asserted itself, and Edburga's ready interest drew from him the story of the wanderings which should have been set down, with the voyages of Othere and Wulfstan, in King Alfred's account of the world known to his age. Perhaps the children heard most of his doings. They made friends with him immediately, and so long as he was at Brockstede, they were sure to be there too, one or both of them always on his knee, asking in language which he understood for stories or songs. For them he touched his long silent harp and shaped wooden swords and tiny bows, and applauded them as they charged imaginary Danes in the hall, and then wept again himself to remember how the king had done the same by his own little grandson, and had loved to gird him with the sword which he would never teach him to wield. So he slipped into the old place in the house, and, as the days drew in more and more and the evenings were spent round the hearth, they could almost have fancied the world had gone back six years to the February days when he came to them first. He had much to hear himself about the warships that he and Elfric had planned together, and of their first sea-fight off the Isle of Wight in the summer after he left England, when Elfric had struck his first blow for the king, and had brought the crews of two Danish vessels prisoners to Alfred at Winchester. And Elfric would tell what the king's plans had been for making England mighty at sea, while he sat with his small son in the cradle at his feet, and rocked it

now and then as long ago he had rocked Eadgyth and Ostritha. And they would all talk over old times, of the turning of Lea river, and of the days when Eadgyth nursed her unknown brother in Frigyth's hut, and Conan was tried for treason and witchcraft before King Alfred. And of older times still, which the young folks only knew by hearsay, when Thegn Bernulf cast in his lot with the King of Wessex in the darkest days of England's danger.

"Little enough we dreamed then," Wilfrid said, when the others called upon him for the story, "that the king, who held a few fighting men together at Athelney, would rule all England, saving only the part which the Danes yet hold."

"His children shall rule that too," said Alfgar. "The Atheling Edward walked ever in his father's steps, and I trow the pagans fear the lady of the Mercians as sorely as they do the ealdorman himself."

"Methought he would have lived to see it," sighed Conan—"the pagans driven out, and their power broken for ever, the churches and holy houses built again, and the light of learning abroad in the land. His own wise laws kept, justice done to rich and poor, England mighty by land and sea—such was his dream; and he is gone with the work half done."

"Who ever lived to finish here what he began, my son?" said Father Wulfstan. "Short indeed are our days here, though long enough to do well in; and for those of us who can say, as the king said, 'So long as I have lived, I have tried to live worthily,'

who knows what fair work there may be to do in the life beyond?"

"And what shall befall us who are left behind lacking him?" sighed Alfgar.

"What should you do, my son," said the lady Edburga, "but set your hand to the work he began, even as his own children are doing boldly? Teach your sons, and your sons' sons, what was his desire for this land—an England bold in war and great in wisdom, and strong above all in the fear of God—and show them that it is their part to make it so."

"Ever remembering by Whose aid alone they can make their country great," said Father Wulfstan.

Conan drew a book from his bosom. "I have carried this with me over many lands," he said. "'Twas a fashion of mine to set down some of the words our lord king said, even as he would put down other men's wise sayings. I had thought to have many more to write; but the book is not full, and on this page are the last I wrote. Canst read it, Lady Eadgyth? I fear me the writing is crabbed enough."

Eadgyth took the volume, and read aloud—

"Grant now, O Lord, to our minds, that they may ascend to Thee through the difficulties of this world.

"Hate evil, and fly from it as best ye may. Love virtues and follow them. Ye have great need that ye always do well, for ye are always in the Presence of the Eternal, Almighty God. He beholdeth it all, and He will recompense it all."

So wrote the great king, a thousand years ago, when England was young.

In the strength of that faith he laid the foundation of our country's greatness. By the same rules alone can we truly serve the land he saved for us.

"Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet!
Lest we forget, lest we forget."

NEW STORY BOOKS

FOR THE YOUNG

PUBLISHED BY THE

NATIONAL SOCIETY

NEW STORY BOOKS FOR THE YOUNG

BY CHARLOTTE M. YONGE

THE MAKING OF A MISSIONARY

3/6 By CHARLOTTE M. YONGE, Author of "The Heir of Redclyffe," &c. With Five Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s.* 6*d.*

Miss Yonge, in her new story for the young, describes the longings of some young people to devote their lives to the work of the Mission Field, and how their "earnest day-dreams" were realized when Edward Bryant and his young wife Aline, with her sister Mabel, join Archdeacon Goodrich and his band of helpers who are working under the direction of the Bishop of North China.

BY MARY H. DEBENHAM

KEEPERS OF ENGLAND

3/6 By MARY H. DEBENHAM, Author of "One Red Rose," &c. With Five Full-page Illustrations by GERTRUDE D. HAMMOND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s.* 6*d.*

Miss Debenham's new story is both historical and timely, dealing with life in Anglo-Saxon England at the time when King Alfred the Great was arduously engaged in his almost continuous struggles with the harrying Norsemen from Scandinavia and Denmark. Edburga, the wife of the Thegn of Woodbourne, is one of those specimens of sweet womanhood which Miss Debenham draws with much tenderness and delicacy.

BY ANNETTE LYSTER

THE FORTUNES OF PEGGY TREHERNE

2/6 By ANNETTE LYSTER, Author of "The White Gypsy," &c. With Three Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 2*s.* 6*d.*

The "Fortunes" of Peggy are a series of very varied vicissitudes, including a childhood in the workhouse, a girlhood in domestic service, and a young womanhood in which a rich uncle from foreign parts appears, and acts to a considerable extent the part played by the good fairy in the old-fashioned tales of forty or fifty years ago.

BY KATHERINE E. VERNHAM

BAB'S BABY, AND OTHER STORIES

2/– By KATHERINE E. VERNHAM, Author of "Such a Tomboy," &c. With Two Full-page Illustrations by GERTRUDE D. HAMMOND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 2*s.*

A series of short stories turning mainly upon the lives of the poor in our great cities, and pointing out the many valuable lessons to be learnt from them.

NATIONAL SOCIETY'S DEPOSITORY, SANCTUARY, WESTMINSTER.

BY H. ELRINGTON

A STORY OF ANCIENT WALES

By H. ELRINGTON. With Two Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 2*s.* **2/-**

A story of the times of Caractacus and the Ancient Britons, dealing chiefly with adventures in the lives of a slave named David, and Caradoc, the son of a Roman Chief.

BY A. V. DUTTON

JONATHAN TOMS

By A. V. DUTTON, Author of "Wisdom's Folly," &c. With Two Full-page Illustrations by C. J. STANILAND. Cloth boards, gilt, price 1*s.* 6*d.* **1/6**

An amusing tale of a holiday spent abroad, where Jonathan Toms meets with Maisie Palliser, who is on a travelling tour with her parents. The story proceeds to show how the friendship grew, and how it ultimately ended.

In addition to the preceding, the following Prize Books are also published by the Society:—

BY CHARLOTTE M. YONGE

Author of "The Heir of Redclyffe," "Cameos from English History," &c.

THE HERD BOY AND HIS HERMIT

With Five Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s.* 6*d.* **3/6**

A story based upon that of the Lord Clifford, who was given by his mother into the keeping of a Cumberland shepherd during the troublous times of the Wars of the Roses.

"It is a thoroughly good book, and will sustain its author's high reputation."
SCHOOL BOARD CHRONICLE.

THE PATRIOTS OF PALESTINE

With Five Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s.* 6*d.* **3/6**

This is a story descriptive of the rising of the Maccabees, showing the difficulties with which they had to contend in order to remain true alike to their Faith and to their country.

"The characters are picturesquely drawn, and the story altogether is a pleasant example of Miss Yonge's work."—MANCHESTER GUARDIAN.

BY CHARLOTTE M. YONGE—*continued*

FOUNDED ON PAPER

3/6 With Five Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s.* 6*d.*

This story—a sequel to "The Carbonels," although, for readers, quite independent of that narrative—gives a varied and lifelike picture of village life in the famous Jubilee year of 1887.

"This book will well sustain Miss Yonge's credit as a clever writer of Christmas stories."—THE GUARDIAN.

THE WARDSHIP OF STEEPCOOMBE

3/6 With Five Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s.* 6*d.*

A story of the troublous times of the youth of King Richard II., concluding with a graphic and spirited description of Wat Tyler's rebellion.

THE CARBONELS

3/6 With Five Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s.* 6*d.*

"The Carbonels" deals with the various sides of life in the little village of Uphill Priors in the years immediately following 1822.

"This is altogether a well-written, thoroughly interesting story."
SATURDAY REVIEW.

THE COOK AND THE CAPTIVE

3/6 With Five Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s.* 6*d.*

This story is descriptive of life in Gaul in the times of Franks and Burgundians, telling how young Attalus is given as a hostage to a barbarian chief, of the good he is able to effect among his heathen surroundings, and of his rescue and his final escape to his own home.

"A historical romance suited to youthful readers. . . . Told with all the art in narration that Miss Yonge has long been noted for."—RECORD.

THE TREASURES IN THE MARSHES

2/6 With Three Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 2*s.* 6*d.*

This tale is concerned with the finding of Anglo-Saxon treasures in marshy land by members of two neighbouring families, and describes the different ways in which the treasures were dealt with and the ultimate consequences.

BY CHARLOTTE M. YONGE—*continued*

THE CROSS ROADS

With Five Full-page Illustrations by J. F. WEEDON. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s.* 6*d.* **3/6**

A story of life in domestic service at Langhope Mead, with some amusing sketches of character both in the servants' hall and in the neighbouring village.

"The story is vigorously written throughout, and abounds in amusing incidents and exciting episodes."—EDUCATIONAL TIMES.

THE CONSTABLE'S TOWER

Or, The Times of Magna Charta. With Four Full-page Illustrations by C. O. MURRAY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s.* **3/-**

A tale of the days of Magna Charta, showing the nobility of the character of Hubert de Burgh, and concluding with a spirited description of the sea-fight off Dover.

THE SLAVES OF SABINUS

With Five Full-page Illustrations by C. J. STANILAND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s.* 6*d.* **3/6**

A powerful story of the Christian Church in the days when Vespasian was the Roman Emperor, and his more genial son Titus was newly returned from his conquest of the Jews.

THE CUNNING WOMAN'S GRANDSON

A Story of Cheddar a Hundred Years Ago. With Five Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s.* 6*d.* **3/6**

An attractive story of the social and religious improvements that were made in the Cheddar district through the philanthropic zeal of Miss Hannah More and her sisters.

UNDER THE STORM

Or, Steadfast's Charge. With Six Full-page Illustrations. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s.* 6*d.* **3/6**

In "Under the Storm" the author of "The Heir of Redclyffe" depicts the troublous experiences of the family of a small yeoman farmer during the great Civil War.

"'Under the Storm' is in all respects worthy of the reputation of the author of 'The Heir of Redclyffe.'"—SPECTATOR.

BY CHARLOTTE M. YONGE—*continued*

OUR NEW MISTRESS

3/- Or, Changes at Brookfield Earl. With Four Full-page Illustrations by C. J. STANILAND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s.*

"Our New Mistress" depicts with much truth to life the difficulties met with by a young trained schoolmistress in taking charge of a village school where innovations are not welcomed.

BY FRANCES MARY PEARD

Author of "The Rose Garden," "The Country Cousin," "Paul's Sister," &c.

THE ABBOT'S BRIDGE

3/6 With Five Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s.* 6*d.*

A story of life on the road in the time of Edward the Third, and of the great rising of the townspeople of Bury St. Edmunds against the authorities at the Abbey.

"Miss Peard should find her popularity increased by 'The Abbot's Bridge.' It is a capital story, vigorously told."—MANCHESTER GUARDIAN.

THE LOCKED DESK

3/6 With Five Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s.* 6*d.*

In this book Miss Peard has left the historical field in which most of her previous tales for young people have lain, giving us instead a story of the present day, in which certain documents in Mrs. Barton's locked desk play an important part.

THE BLUE DRAGON

3/6 With Five Full-page Illustrations by C. J. STANILAND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s.* 6*d.*

"The Blue Dragon" is the sign of an inn at Chester, in which city the scene of the story is laid, in the discontented, turbulent times that followed immediately upon the battle of Bosworth Field.

SCAPEGRACE DICK

3/6 With Four Full-page Illustrations. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s.* 6*d.*

A spirited story of adventure in England and the Low Countries in the days of the Commonwealth.

"A book for boys, which will be read with equal pleasure by their sisters."
PALL MALL GAZETTE.

BY FRANCES MARY PEARD—*continued*

PRENTICE HUGH

With Six Full-page Illustrations. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s.* 6*d.* **3/6**

"Prentice Hugh" gives a graphic account of life during the reign of Edward the First, mainly in the cathedral city of Exeter.

TO HORSE AND AWAY

With Five Full-page Illustrations by C. J. STANILAND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s.* 6*d.* **3/6**

The fortunes of a Royalist family in the times of the Great Civil War form the leading theme of Miss Peard's story, which, together with many adventures, gives a few graphic scenes from the life of Charles II. in his flight from Worcester Field.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "MADEMOISELLE MORI" &c.

STÉPHANIE'S CHILDREN

With Five Full-page Illustrations by C. J. STANILAND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s.* 6*d.* **3/6**

The story of the escape of Stéphanie, a young widow of high family, and her two step-children, from France during the Great Revolution. Descriptive also of the life led among the colony of *émigrés* in London.

"Another proof of the versatility and charm of writing that is already well known in the author of the 'Atelier du Lys,' and will prove a delightful addition to a girl's library."—SATURDAY REVIEW.

NOT ONE OF US

With Five Full-page Illustrations by J. F. WEEDON. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s.* 6*d.* **3/6**

Descriptive of the career of a young schoolmistress in Northern Italy, and of the manners and customs of the folk dwelling in the valley of Fiorasca.

KINSFOLK AND OTHERS

With Five Full-page Illustrations by C. O. MURRAY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s.* 6*d.* **3/6**

A study in the conflicting duties that claim the obedience of Olive Garth, who has been brought up from her earliest days by her grandmother, and whose mother returns from Australia after an absence of seventeen years.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "MADEMOISELLE MORI," &c.—*continued*

BANNING AND BLESSING

3/6 With Five Full-page Illustrations by C. J. STANILAND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s.* 6*d.*

Descriptive of country life on the confines of wild Dartmoor, at the beginning of the present century. The banning of Lois Smerdon, the black witch, at length comes to an end, and so plentiful are the blessings which follow that all ends happily and full of promise for the future.

A LITTLE STEP-DAUGHTER

3/6 With Six Full-page Illustrations. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s.* 6*d.*

"A Little Step-daughter" is descriptive of life in the South of France in the early part of the eighteenth century.

"The anonymous authoress of 'Mademoiselle Mori' is one of the most delightful of writers for girls. Her books are characterised by a delicacy of touch rarely met with."
STANDARD.

BY M. & C. LEE

Authors of "The Oak Staircase," "Joachim's Spectacles," &c.

MISS COVENTRY'S MAID

2/6 With Three Full-page Illustrations by GERTRUDE D. HAMMOND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 2*s.* 6*d.*

The identity of Miss Coventry's maid is a mystery to all but her young mistress, and the mystery remains until after the performance of *She Stoops to Conquer* at a certain country house where Miss Coventry had been invited to stay.

ST. DUNSTAN'S FAIR

2/6 With Three Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 2*s.* 6*d.*

"St. Dunstan's Fair" tells of the folks living in a small country village in Kent, in the year of Waterloo, of what happened at the Fair itself, and of the consequences to Nancy Springett and poor George Colgate.

"A very pretty story with some pathetic scenes in it."—SATURDAY REVIEW.

THE FAMILY COACH

3/- With Four Full-page Illustrations by J. F. WEEDON. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s.*

A story of a family of children, their schemes and plans, and the misfortunes that consequently ensue, in the course of a journey from London to Mentone, where they are to meet their parents, who have just returned from India.

"'The Family Coach' is as attractive within as without."—TIMES.

BY M. & C. LEE—*continued*

GOLDHANGER WOODS

A Child's Romance. With Two Full-page Illustrations. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *2s.* **2/-**

"Goldhanger Woods" is the story of the romantic adventure of a young girl a hundred years ago among a band of desperate smugglers.

"This 'child's romance' is ingeniously planned and well executed."—SPECTATOR.

MRS. DIMSDALE'S GRANDCHILDREN

With Four Full-page Illustrations by C. J. STANILAND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *3s.* **3/-**

A large number of Mrs. Dimsdale's grandchildren are gathered together one Christmas at the Downs House in Sussex. Milly, in emulation of Aunt Hetty, writes a play. Difficulties intervene, but everything comes right in the end, and the story concludes with an account of the acting.

BY M. BRAMSTON

Author of "A Woman of Business," "Rosamond Ferrars," &c.

BUGLE MINOR

With Two Full-page Illustrations by C. J. STANILAND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *2s.* **2/-**

A story telling the adventures of a lad who joins the Royal Marines as bugle boy, and goes out on active service to the African Coast, where he is captured and carried inland, there to meet with many adventures, and to encounter many perils.

"The story will be read with interest by boys."—LEEDS MERCURY.

TOLD BY TWO

With Three Full-page Illustrations by C. J. STANILAND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *2s. 6d.* **2/6**

The "two" are Hester Hazel, the old nurse, and her former charge, Julian Chalfont, and the story turns upon the loss of some valuable family jewels, and their ultimate recovery and the consequent clearing of Hester's character.

"A story of engrossing interest, particularly to girls."—RECORD.

THE STORY OF A CAT AND A CAKE

With Three Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *2s. 6d.* **2/6**

A story of Nuremberg in the time of the Thirty Years' War, containing adventures and perils in plenty and giving some effective pictures of city and country life in Germany a couple of centuries ago.

"This is a story of the siege of Nuremberg, told with the skill which Miss Bramston always shows in her presentations of life whether past or present."—SPECTATOR.

BY M. BRAMSTON—*continued*

THEIR FATHER'S WRONG

2/6 With Three Full-page Illustrations by C. J. STANILAND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *2s. 6d.*

The story of the children of a man who had been gradually entangled in a dynamite conspiracy, and of their successful endeavour to repair, as far as possible, the wrong and suffering which their father's action had brought upon innocent people.

WINNING HIS FREEDOM

2/6 With Three Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *2s. 6d.*

The lesson taught by Miss Bramston's story is that of honesty and truth at all costs, as shown in the way in which young Piers Aylward freed himself, after much pain and trouble, from the slavery imposed upon him by his cowardly cousin Henderson.

"'Winning his Freedom' is an admirable book for schoolboys."—RECORD.

LOTTIE LEVISON

2/- With Two Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *2s.*

A South London story for young women and elder girls, describing how Lottie Levison was filled with a longing to teach others the means of getting the happiness which she had gained for herself.

THE ADVENTURES OF DENIS

2/6 With Three Full-page Illustrations by J. F. WEEDON. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *2s. 6d.*

The adventures in question are closely connected with the rising of 1745 and the retreat of Prince Charles Edward from Derby to the north again.

"'The Adventures of Denis' is a charming tale of 1745, which would delight any one to read."—SATURDAY REVIEW.

ABBY'S DISCOVERIES

2/6 With Three Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *2s. 6d.*

The story of the successive discoveries, in very ordinary matters, that little Abigail made in her earliest years, and the meaning and lessons which they have for all those concerned in bringing up the young.

"We have not seen a better book about the feelings and experiences of childhood than this since we read the 'My Childhood' of Madame Michelet."—SPECTATOR.

BY M. BRAMSTON—*continued*

A VILLAGE GENIUS

A True Story of Oberammergau. With Two Full-page Illustrations by J. F. WEEDON. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *2s.* **2/-**

A tale of Oberammergau and of the life of Rochus Dedler, the composer of the music that is still used at the Passion Play there.

DANGEROUS JEWELS

With Four Full-page Illustrations by J. F. WEEDON. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *3s.* **3/-**

The opening scenes of this story are laid in Brittany at the time of the great French Revolution, but the scene changes, and the later chapters give some vivid descriptions of rough life in a lonely hut on the moorlands of Devonshire.

A PAIR OF COUSINS

With Three Full-page Illustrations by C. J. STANILAND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *2s. 6d.* **2/6**

The pair of cousins are Flower Callaway, who has a weakness for appearing interesting and attractive in the eyes of others, and Avis Goldenlea, a healthy-minded girl of real sterling worth.

THE HEROINE OF A BASKET VAN

With Three Full-page Illustrations. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *2s. 6d.* **2/6**

The heroine is little Phenie, whom her father, Jonathan Redmoor, takes with him to travel about the country in his basket van.

"There are plenty of incidents in the tale to interest the reader, and, as such a story should end, Phenie finds her right place after all."—SCHOOLMASTER.

UNCLE IVAN

With Three Full-page Illustrations. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *2s. 6d.* **2/6**

"Uncle Ivan" gives a striking and eventful picture of life in England and Russia about forty years ago; together with some insight into the methods of the Russian Government for dealing with political crime.

SILVER STAR VALLEY

With Four Full-page Illustrations by C. J. STANILAND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *3s.* **3/-**

In this story Miss Bramston gives a striking and vivid picture of life among a mining community in the Rocky Mountains.

BY C. R. COLERIDGE

Author of "An English Squire," "The Girls of Flaxley," &c.

A BAG OF FARTHINGS

2/- With Two Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 2*s*.

The "bag of farthings" contains the prizes for which certain boys and girls run races, and some of the coins become mingled and interchanged with three gold napoleons that are lost. The story tells how Bertie Brown is wrongfully suspected of theft, and how at length he discovers the real culprit and clears his own character.

"The delicate touch with which these pictures are handled is worthy of all praise."
SPECTATOR.

MAX, FRITZ, AND HOB

3/- With Four Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s*.

A tale of adventure four hundred years ago, the scene of which is laid principally at the Castle of Lindenberg, in the Bavarian highlands.

FIFTY POUNDS

3/- A Sequel to "The Green Girls of Greythorpe." With Four Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s*.

A sequel to "The Green Girls of Greythorpe," showing what became of the principal characters in that story after they had grown into young men and young women. The interest of the present story, however, to the reader is in no sense dependent on its predecessor.

THE GREEN GIRLS OF GREYTHORPE

3/- With Four Full-page Illustrations by C. J. STANILAND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s*.

A story of an old endowed institution that has come under the notice of the Charity Commissioners, who decide that a reorganisation and extension of the school is necessary, and that the education it affords must be brought into harmony with modern requirements.

"The story is very prettily told, and, although quiet in tone, contains a full share of incident and interest."—STANDARD.

MAUD FLORENCE NELLIE

3/- Or, Don't Care. With Four Full-page Illustrations by C. J. STANILAND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s*.

A story, showing how a veritable scapegrace of a boy, Harry Whittaker, and his careless sister, Florrie, are gradually brought to see the costs that may be entailed by the spirit which says "Don't care" to every gentle correction of a fault.

BY C. R. COLERIDGE—*continued*

REUBEN EVERETT

With Four Full-page Illustrations by C. J. STANILAND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *2s. 6d.* **2/6**

Miss Coleridge's "Reuben Everett" is the story of "a truant bird, that thought his home a cage," and describes the early days of training colleges and railways in England.

BY MARY H. DEBENHAM

Author of "The Princesses of Penruth," &c.

SOWING AND HARVESTING

With Five Full-page Illustrations by GERTRUDE D. HAMMOND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *3s. 6d.* **3/6**

A tale of the days of the great French Revolution, describing the trials of an Englishman living in France at that time, and showing with much force the value of this country as a place of shelter for the refugees.

"A book with a thoroughly good influence, and one that will be prized for its real worth."—THE PRACTICAL TEACHER.

MY LADY'S SLIPPERS

With Four Full-page Illustrations by GERTRUDE D. HAMMOND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *3s.* **3/-**

The story of a boy brought up under the care of an old servant of his parents, and how he came into possession of his father's property through the discovery of the lost family diamonds secreted in the heels of a pair of his mother's slippers, which by an odd chance he had kept.

"Is an excellent story and is sure to be popular."—JOURNAL OF EDUCATION.

ONE RED ROSE

With Five Full-page Illustrations by GERTRUDE D. HAMMOND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *3s. 6d.* **3/6**

Miss Debenham here gives us one of her tender character sketches in the description of the bringing up of a genuine Irish girl, Rosaleen, at Wold Lodge, under her Aunt Alicia, who holds her house and grounds under the tenure of "one red rose," paid yearly to the lord of the manor.

"A fascinating character-sketch of a genuinely erratic Irish girl."
ST. JAMES'S GAZETTE.

THE LAIRD'S LEGACY

With Three Full-page Illustrations by GERTRUDE D. HAMMOND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *2s. 6d.* **2/6**

Miss Debenham's new story follows the fortunes of an exiled Scottish laird, Sir Patrick Maxwell, in the early years of the eighteenth century, and gives some account of the campaigning in the Low Countries.

BY MARY H. DEBENHAM—*continued*

TWO MAIDEN AUNTS

2/- With Two Full-page Illustrations by GERTRUDE D. HAMMOND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *2s.*

The "Maiden Aunts" are two girls, Angelica and Betty Wyndham, upon whom (owing to a series of misfortunes) devolves the bringing up of little Godfrey, the only child of their brother.

"A charming story. . . . All the characters in the book are well delineated. . . . Miss Debenham may well be congratulated."—ST. JAMES'S GAZETTE.

THE MAVIS AND THE MERLIN

2/- With Two Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *2s.*

In "The Mavis and the Merlin" Miss Debenham gives some graphic pictures of the storm that raged in the Low Countries during the latter half of the sixteenth century, when William the Silent was making his resolute attempt to found the Dutch Republic.

MY GOD-DAUGHTER

2/- With Two Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *2s.*

"My God-daughter" is little Theodosia (the motherless child of some strolling players) named after the god-mother, Miss Theodosia Cartaret. The story relates how the players' children were lost and found again, in London, at the time when the Gordon Riots were at their height.

MOOR AND MOSS

2/6 With Three Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *2s. 6d.*

A story of the Border in the first half of the sixteenth century, of the struggles that were for ever taking place there and the raids that were being made.

"A story of high courage and reckless daring. . . . For its historical interest and literary charm, a book to be heartily commended."—WESTERN ANTIQUARY.

FOR KING AND HOME

2/6 With Three Full-page Illustrations by J. F. WEEDON. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *2s. 6d.*

Of the rising in La Vendée during the great French Revolution, and of the adventures that subsequently befell a well-to-do family there, together with an English cousin Dorothy, who was staying at the château at the time.

BY MARY H. DEBENHAM—*continued*

MISTRESS PHIL

With Two Full-page Illustrations by C. O. MURRAY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *2s.* **2/-**

"Mistress Phil" is Phillis Juliana Cheviot, and the story describes her stay at Waltham Cross in the year 1760, and the results that followed from it, giving also some lively pictures of mail-coaches and highwaymen.

"A book good enough for anybody to read, of whatever age."
SCHOOL BOARD CHRONICLE.

FAIRMEADOWS FARM

With Two Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *2s.* **2/-**

The scene is laid in Hampshire about the time of Monmouth's rebellion. The story gives some vivid pictures of the opening at Winchester of Judge Jeffreys' harsh campaign against the rebels, and of the clouds that hung over the neighbourhood for a time in consequence.

"A simple yet capitally related story, and the pathetic features are very effectively realised."—LIVERPOOL COURIER.

A LITTLE CANDLE

With Five Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *3s. 6d.* **3/6**

Miss Debenham's story is concerned with Scotland in the stormy days of Claverhouse. The "Little Candle" is Bride Galbraith, who, by her tenderness and grace, softens the time of trial and affliction.

ST. HELEN'S WELL

With Two Full-page Illustrations by C. J. STANILAND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *2s.* **2/-**

"St. Helen's Well" is a story of events that followed the rising in 1745 in favour of the Young Pretender.

BY FREDERICK C. BADRICK

Author of "Starwood Hall," "The Spanish Galleon," &c.

THE STONE DOOR

With Three Full-page Illustrations by C. J. STANILAND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *2s. 6d.* **2/6**

The narrative of certain strange things that befell the brig *Talyfan* on her voyage from Rotterdam to Liverpool about a hundred years ago, and of the way in which Justice worked out to its end.

"A story full of stirring incident such as boys love to read."—RECORD.

BY FREDERICK C. BADRICK—*continued*

THE PUFF OF WIND

1/6 With Two Full-page Illustrations by C. J. STANILAND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 1*s.* 6*d.*

A tale of harbour and heath in the west country a hundred years ago, telling of the evil treatment of Oliver Mackworth and of the strange happening by means of which justice was meted out to the guilty.

"The writing shows a strong sense of 'style' and a quaintness which touches originality."—SATURDAY REVIEW.

THE GOLDEN BUCKLE

3/6 With Five Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s.* 6*d.*

A story of London in the year of the Great Plague, showing how one John Garside, a hosier in Holborn, and his family took refuge on board *The Golden Buckle*, then lying in the river.

KING'S FERRY

2/6 In the Days of the Press-gang. With Three Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 2*s.* 6*d.*

Concerning a certain ship's doctor who came to Weymouth in press-gang days, and, staying at King's Ferry, tempted Simon Lydgate, the ferryman, to do wrong; of the punishment that fell on Lydgate, and of the joy and peace that followed the home-coming of his boy, Wat.

JOAN'S VICTORY

1/6 With Two Full-page Illustrations by J. F. WEEDON. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 1*s.* 6*d.*

Descriptive of a young woman of quick, passionate temper and stubborn purpose, and of the means by which a young child unconsciously brought her back to her better self and helped to soften her heart.

"Admirably detailed. Joan is really a very powerful psychological study."
SPECTATOR.

PECKOVER'S MILL

3/6 A Story of the Great Frost of 1739. With Five Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s.* 6*d.*

A story of a Jacobite conspiracy that was on foot in the time of the great frost of 1739, showing how Silas Peckover came home from abroad and took possession of the home of his forefathers, and how the sweet womanliness and honesty of Mistress Ruth influenced him for good.

"Silas Peckover is a character quite worthy of Ainsworth."—ACADEMY.

BY FREDERICK C. BADRICK—*continued*

CHRIS DERRICK

A Stormy Passage in a Boy's Life. With Two Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *2s.* **2/-**

This story supplies some lively sketches of what a mutiny often led to at the beginning of the present century, and of the narrow shifts that smugglers ran in escaping from the revenue officers.

STARWOOD HALL

A Boy's Adventure. With Two Full-page Illustrations by C. J. STANILAND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *2s.* **2/-**

A stirring story of how an honest boy fell into the clutches of a band of highwaymen, or "gentlemen of fortune," in the middle of the last century.

"The pictures of rural manners . . . strike us as being extremely life-like."—TIMES.

BY ESMÉ STUART

Author of "The Little Brown Girl," "The Belfry of St. Jude's," &c.

THE KNIGHTS OF ROSEMULLION

With Three Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *2s. 6d.* **2/6**

A romantic picture of some chivalrous children in the present day, showing how the mottoes and watchwords of King Arthur's Knights may still be adopted to good and earnest purpose.

"Will become popular with both boys and girls, and teach them the principles of chivalry, and how they may be found in unexpected places, and applied in unexpected ways."—CHURCH TIMES.

A SMALL LEGACY

With Two Full-page Illustrations by J. F. WEEDON. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price *2s.* **2/-**

A story for children, describing the life led by the coastguardsmen and their families at St. Alban's Head, and showing how it is possible for boys and girls to be brave and honourable in all their actions.

"The picture of the quaint little American is most skilfully drawn, and his quaint sayings are throughout very amusing."—EDUCATIONAL TIMES.

A NEST OF ROYALISTS

With Two Full-page Illustrations by J. F. WEEDON. Cloth boards, gilt, price *1s. 6d.* **1/6**

A story of Blois in the year 1832, of an English family—the Merediths—who went to live there, and of the circumstances under which they became connected with a Royalist plot against the rule of Louis Philippe.

BY ESMÉ STUART—*continued*

THE SILVER MINE

3/- An Underground Story. With Four Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s*.

An account of life on the rocky Devonshire coast, an unsuccessful attempt to reopen a disused silver mine, and a long-standing family feud between the Redwoods and the Pennants, with the incidents that served to bring it to an end.

"A very bright, attractive story. The children are natural, and the style is fresh and spirited."—JOURNAL OF EDUCATION.

THE VICAR'S TRIO

3/6 With Five Full-page Illustrations by C. J. STANILAND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s*. 6*d*.

The story of how young Lord Faulconbridge, a peevish and irritable boy, is brought to see that the rank and wealth with which he has been endowed bring with them equally great responsibilities.

CAST ASHORE

3/- With Four Full-page Illustrations by C. J. STANILAND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s*.

It was little Mona who was cast ashore on the North Lancashire coast, after the total wreck of the ship in which she was travelling under the care of her father's servant, Hanson. How Jephtha Toppin afterwards lures her away, with a view to earning a reward, and how she is eventually rescued—both are told with considerable power and vividness.

FOR HALF-A-CROWN

3/- With Four Full-page Illustrations. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s*.

Half-a-crown is the price that Mrs. Chemmo, a retired housekeeper living in the cathedral city of Hedderstone on an annuity from her former mistress, pays for a little waif, Natalia, to an Italian colony in a squalid Portsmouth alley.

CARRIED OFF

3/- A Story of Pirate Times. With Four Full-page Illustrations by J. F. WEEDON. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s*.

It is fearless Harry Fenn, the son of an Essex yeoman farmer, who is "carried off" by Captain Henry Morgan, the famous buccaneer, and his men, to the West Indies, where the Spanish settlements are attacked, and adventures in plenty follow.

"Miss Stuart has gone with the times, and has given us a vigorous and well-told story of the days of the buccaneers."—STANDARD.

BY M. E. PALGRAVE

Author of
"Under the Blue Flag," "Miles Lambert's Three Chances," &c.

IN CHARGE

A Story of Rough Times. With Five Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 3*s*. **3/-**

A stirring story of the days when smugglers were in plenty and free-trading (as it was called) was in full swing.

"Full of incident and interest, very pleasantly told, and breathes an excellent spirit throughout."—WESTERN MORNING NEWS.

A PROMISE KEPT

With Four Full-page Illustrations. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 2*s*. 6*d*. **2/6**

A story with a lofty purpose, showing the amount of self-denial that is necessary in those who leave their home and kindred to engage in missionary work in far-off lands.

BY PENELOPE LESLIE

Author of "Marjory's White Rat," &c.

GUY'S DUTY

With Frontispiece by GERTRUDE D. HAMMOND. Cloth boards, gilt, price 1*s*. **1/-**

The life of two young English children during six weeks spent in Bombay, the story telling how Guy by carelessness led his little sister into mischief, but finally learnt the lesson that in so doing he had been altogether negligent of the duty that had been entrusted to him.

"Is a pretty little story. . . . . The moral is the duty of obedience and faithfulness to a trust."—THE RECORD.

GWEN

With Frontispiece by C. J. STANILAND. Cloth boards, gilt, price 1*s*. **1/-**

We have here a story of two high-spirited children who delight in doing things which have been forbidden, and who are ultimately brought to a sense of their wrong by the kindly advice of their grandmother.

"It is just the book for children, and points an excellent moral."—SPECTATOR.

MISS BARTON'S BICYCLE

With Frontispiece by GERTRUDE D. HAMMOND. Cloth boards, gilt, price 1*s*. **1/-**

Timothy and Minna are keenly anxious to ride bicycles, and in a weak moment borrow Miss Barton's bicycle without having first obtained the owner's consent. Unfortunate results ensue, but a lesson is thereby learnt, which is both wholesome and productive of good.

"Child life is portrayed with much force in this charming little book. Timothy and Minna are delightful characters, who are much like brothers and sisters of to-day."
TEACHERS' AID.

BY PENELOPE LESLIE—*continued.*

DOROTHY'S STEPMOTHER

1/- With Frontispiece by C. J. STANILAND. Cloth boards, gilt, price 1*s.*

Motherless little Dorothy went into the wood to look for fairies, and found instead a very amiable young lady who eventually filled up the vacant place in the home and brought sunshine into Dorothy's life again.

"This is a simple and pleasant little story of how a little girl cherishes great hopes, and finds them fulfilled in a quite unexpected way."—SPECTATOR.

TROUBLESOME COUSINS

1/- With Frontispiece by W. S. STACEY. Cloth boards, gilt, price 1*s.*

"Troublesome Cousins" is a story specially suited for very young children, and describes some of the scrapes in which Stella Weston and her cousin Guy found themselves, partly through their restlessness and partly through their desire to be independent.

BY AUDREY CURTIS

Author of "Little Miss Curlylocks," &c.

PLAIN JEREMIAH

2/- With Two Full-page Illustrations by GERTRUDE D. HAMMOND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 2*s.*

Jeremiah is only a lout of a boy in a south country village, but he has sterling stuff in him, which is brought out both by his intimacy with the old shepherd on the downs and by his acquaintance with the "Awkward Squad," who are no other than the four young children of a retired army officer.

"A most interesting story . . . merits special praise, and will become a prime favourite with the youngsters when known."—TEACHERS' AID.

THE ARTIST OF CROOKED ALLEY

1/6 With Two Full-page Illustrations by GERTRUDE D. HAMMOND. Cloth boards, gilt, price 1*s.* 6*d.*

The artist was only nine years old and lived in Crooked Alley; his canvas was the pavement of a London street, his colours no more than a motley collection of odds and ends of coloured chalks.

"A story of exceptional interest; one that attracts and retains the reader from beginning to end."—TEACHERS' AID.

LITTLE MISS CURLYLOCKS

2/- With Two Full-page Illustrations by GERTRUDE D. HAMMOND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 2*s.*

This story relates how "Little Miss Curlylocks," living with her high-born grandparents at Montmorency Manor, becomes acquainted with Alice Fogerty, her brother Tim, and the Fat Baby, and what happens in consequence.

BY KATHERINE E. VERNHAM

SUCH A TOMBOY, AND OTHER STORIES

With Two Full-page Illustrations by GERTRUDE D. HAMMOND. Cloth boards, gilt, price 1*s.* 6*d.* **1/6**

A collection of eight short stories, chiefly concerned with the lives of the very poor, and the pathos and wide charity with which they are often filled.

"This attractive little volume contains eight short stories. All are good and pleasant reading."—GIRLS' AND INFANTS' MISTRESS.

JO: A STUPID BOY, AND OTHER STORIES

With Two Full-page Illustrations by GERTRUDE D. HAMMOND. Cloth boards, gilt, price 1*s.* 6*d.* **1/6**

A collection of short stories, chiefly of life among the poor in great cities.

"May be recommended with confidence as likely to amuse young boys and to suggest wholesome thoughts."—GUARDIAN.

THE TUCKERS' TURKEY

And other Stories. With Two Full-page Illustrations by C. J. STANILAND. Cloth boards, gilt, price 1*s.* 6*d.* **1/6**

This is another volume of short stories, evidently drawn from actual observation of some of the finer phases of character to be found among the more indigent classes and even among the waifs and strays of London and other cities and large towns.

"These stories are skilfully told . . . some are highly dramatic, and all are more or less pathetic."—TEACHERS' AID.

A WONDERFUL CHRISTMAS

And other Stories. With Two Full-page Illustrations by C. J. STANILAND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 2*s.* **2/-**

A collection of a dozen short stories, dealing for the most part with the waifs and strays to be found in our great cities, and with some of the more admirable points so often to be observed in their characters.

BY A. E. DEANE

A SUNDAY IN SUMMER

With Frontispiece by W. S. STACEY. Cloth boards, gilt, price 1*s.* **1/-**

The story of a crippled lad who was always wishing he could be useful, and how at last he was rewarded by being able to save a train from being wrecked by signalling to the driver.

"Is well written and shows grasp."—THE RECORD.

A GUILTY SILENCE

With Two Full-page Illustrations by GERTRUDE D. HAMMOND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 2*s.* **2/-**

An interesting story showing that ill-gotten gains do nobody any good, and that honesty is the best policy.

"A pleasant interesting tale with good sound teaching, appropriate to the actual needs of very many actual young people."—SCHOOL BOARD CHRONICLE.

BY A. E. DEANE—*continued*

THE TWO ELLENS

1/- With Frontispiece by C. J. STANILAND. Cloth boards, gilt, price 1*s.*

Miss Deane's story will be found a simple and interesting piece of reading for the very young; moreover, it contains some sound warnings to parents as to their responsibilities and the unwisdom of always letting children have their own way.

"This is just the sort of book to give as a birthday present or Sunday School prize to a little girl."—THE CHURCHWOMAN.

BY G. NORWAY

A ROMAN HOUSEHOLD

2/6 With Three Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 2*s.* 6*d.*

An interesting description of family life among the Romans in the time of Nero, and of the persecutions and sufferings that the early Christians had to undergo in order to remain true to Him Whom they served.

"Is an excellent gift book and interesting alike to young and old."
GIRLS AND INFANT MISTRESS.

BESSIE KITSON

1/6 With Two Full-page Illustrations by GERTRUDE D. HAMMOND. Cloth boards, gilt, price 1*s.* 6*d.*

Bessie Kitson, left an orphan at a very early age, is fortunately rescued from the squalid home in which she has obtained shelter and taken to live with honest, God-fearing people at Windsor. Ultimately the return of Mr. George Kitson from Australia removes all fear of want alike from Bessie and her faithful foster-mother.

BY L. E. TIDDEMAN

REINE'S KINGDOM

2/- With Two Full-page Illustrations by C. J. STANILAND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 2*s.*

Showing how a young girl gave way to the temptation of ambition, but had the moral courage to confess her faults, which turned out to be blessings in disguise.

"We place it in a very high position among the season's gift books."
TEACHER'S AID.

TAKING FRENCH LEAVE

1/6 With Two Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 1*s.* 6*d.*

Madge and Will Torrance, the twin children of an artist living in the country, weave a most perplexing web about themselves through playing truant from school on a very hot afternoon; and their story is likely to prove a useful lesson to other young folks when tempted to be deceitful.

BY MAUD VEVERS

LETTICE TEMPLE:

A Story of the Days of Bishop Ken. With Two Full-page Illustrations by C. J. STANILAND. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 2*s*. **2/-**

A stirring story of the times of the cruel Judge Jeffreys, and of the dangers encountered in travelling in England two hundred years ago.

"The book is nicely written and got up."—THE JOURNAL OF EDUCATION.

THE KING'S RING

With Frontispiece by W. S. STACEY. Cloth boards, gilt, price 1*s*. **1/-**

A short but effective story of Cavaliers and Roundheads, and of how the Lady Grace Cross contrived to find food and shelter for King Charles I. at a time when he was in great extremity of peril.

"A charming little story of the troublous days when families were divided between Royalists and Roundheads."—THE RECORD.

A KING'S THEGN

By GERALDINE M. GAY. With Two Full-page Illustrations by W. S. STACEY. Cloth boards, gilt, price 1*s*. 6*d*. **1/6**

Describing the life of a Thegn in the time of King Alfred, and giving in the course of the story a very fine description of the great battle of Ethandun, where the Danes under Guthrum were completely defeated.

"Is an attractive story, built on the life of a thegn in the time of King Alfred."
THE RECORD.

A FRIENDLY GIRL

By CATHERINE P. SLATER, Author of "A Goodly Child," &c. With Frontispiece by C. J. STANILAND. Cloth boards, gilt, price 1*s*. **1/-**

This story describes with much pathos and quiet humour how Jeanie Scott, a member of the Girls' Friendly Society, goes as a "general" servant to Miss Marget Melville, an old maid living in the suburbs of Edinburgh, and of certain things that happened while Jeanie was there.

SOME GREAT THING

By LADY DUNBOYNE, Author of "Fritz and his Friends," &c. With Two Full-page Illustrations by HUGH ARNOLD. Bevelled boards, cloth gilt, price 2*s*. **2/-**

The story of a girl who is always looking for some great thing to do in her life, but finds in the end that the majority of people have to be content with doing things that appear small.

"Is a most excellent story in every respect."—TEACHERS' AID.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A BULLDOG

1/-

By Mrs. NEVILLE PEEL. With Frontispiece by W. S. STACEY. Cloth boards, gilt, price 1*s*.

The story of a number of dogs, their airs and graces and their adventures, related by the bulldog himself.

"It is a cleverly written work and deserves to secure widespread popularity.'
TEACHER'S AID.

LOST ON THE MOOR

1/-

By "TAFFY." With Frontispiece. Cloth boards, gilt, price 1*s*.

The story of Little Jack, how he was lost on the moor in a thick fog through his brother's disobedience, and how he was found and finally restored to his home.

Spottiswoode & Co. Printers, New-street Square, London

NSD